A New World, Book 2

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Maribel and Renko are living well in a steadily reviving Gensoukyo, but other realms are not doing as well. 300 years of technological progress have left the moon open to the inhabitants of Earth. And some people are very unhappy about that.

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Prologue

Prologue

In Xanadu did Kublai Khan

A stately Pleasure-Dome decree,

Where Alph, the sacred river ran

Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless sea.

Toyohime could not let herself feel pity for the two men staring at her arrival amid the peach trees. She couldn't let herself think about what this meant for her, her home and the poor souls before her. That would only make things worse.

It helped that their spacesuits made them featureless and kept them from talking.

As the lead figure raised his hand in greeting Toyohime called upon her powers to summon the god of calamities. With the tiniest amount of the gods power the violent materials the humans used for their crafts fuel went out of control. There were a lot of fail safes of course, but against divine intervention even a miniscule chance became near certainty.

The craft began blaring warning signals, and the two intruders turned towards it, probably in shock. Toyohime couldn't be certain, but she imagined they were even more surprised when their surroundings vanished and they appeared somewhere else, on the 'scientific moon.'

She turned to her sister. "Is it taken care of Yorihime?"

Yorihime closed her eyes then shook her head sadly. "Sorry. The humans are gone, but this area's border is too weak, and it's been contaminated. We'll need to cleanse the area and pull back."

Toyohime looked at the beautiful orchard and shook her head again. "We can't keep this up. We're losing too much ground."

Yorihime simply nodded. Toyohime had noticed that her sister hadn't been smiling as much recently. Then again there hadn't been much to smile about.

Sighing Toyohime ran her hand along the trunk of one of the trees, as a wordless apology, before calling on her power again. "Kagazuchi."

The trees all burst into flames, as the god of fire was unleashed upon the garden. Soon there was nothing but ashes that blew away as the atmosphere began to leak.

Yorihime waved over Reisen, her emissary. "Eliminate everything else then return to the city and pack for a meeting with Eirin."

"Um, sure." The moon rabbit replied. She began pulling out the artifices that would make this former part of the lunar capitol indistinguishable from the dead moon surrounding it.

"Let's take the quick route home," Yorihime said waving her fan.

"Sure thing," Toyohime stated. She was tired, and there was a lot of work to be done before she could rest again.

Still she looked back at the tracks in the dirt that the human's lunar rover had made. "I didn't think we'd have to use that plan this soon," she muttered.

This is, unsurprisingly, a continuation of A New World: Book 1, which is available here or on shrinemaiden. While that story can work as a

standalone piece, how and why Maribel and Renko arrived in Gensoukyo is explained much better there.

Chapter 2

Only the phoenix rises, and does not descend…

"Thanks again for helping me Miss Renko. This probability stuff could be useful for my father's business," the young man said with a bow.

"No problem, Shirou. I'm glad I remembered that course myself. Never thought I'd use it," Renko said with a laugh.

The elderly woman in the hallway smiled at the two. "It's good to see you two young ones getting along. Are you sure you wouldn't like to stay for dinner young Renko? I think the whole family will be here…"

Renko fought very hard to keep from rolling her eyes at the woman's unsubtle hint. It helped that Shirou was rolling his own. "Sorry grandmother, my ride'll be here soon, and I wouldn't want to ditch her."

The older woman blinked at the outside world terms Renko used, but managed to keep her pleasant smile. "That's too bad. Well perhaps another time young lady."

Shirou waited until the elderly lady was out of earshot before saying, "Sorry, she's kinda old fashioned."

Renko smiled, "Nah, don't worry about it. My parents can get like that too. Anyway I'll see you next week, and good luck with the herbalist's daughter."

"Uh, thanks." The young man blushed and waved as Renko stepped outside.

Renko waited a few seconds in the street before Maribel wandered out of an alleyway. "Ah, you got out early Renko?"

"Yeah. No reason to start teaching him something new with only a few minutes left," Renko frowned. "Though it sadly did give his grandma time to suggest I settle down with him."

Mary shook her head and laughed. "Still the most eligible bachelorette in the village despite your age, eh Renko?"

Renko tapped Maribel upside the head. "You of all people should know I'm hardly a bachelorette. And you're older then me Mary." She frowned. "And really, the only boys that age who are interested in me are those white knight wannabe's. The ones who are interested more in looking cool saving me from 'that witch' then in the real me."

Maribel frowned as well. "They're still calling me that?"

"Yeah, sorry." Renko said giving Mary a hug to ease the sting. "Even though I'm twice the witch you are…"

"You've got a better cover story," Maribel said. "Oh well." She began walking back towards the alleyway. "We'd better get going or we'll be late to our classes."

Renko smiled ruefully. "Yeah. Three years in college, four years here and we're still in class."

Mary sighed. "Too bad I can't cut classes anymore. Today's going to suck."

"Huh?"

"Ran, wonderful person that she is, is giving me combat training again." Mary said with narrowed eyes. "And it's against Youmi apparently, since I 'need training against armed opponents.'"

Renko shrugged. "At least you know in advance when your combat training is. My combat training still usually happens whenever Marisa busts into the library and fires lasers at me. 'Tradition' they say."

She frowned. "Though Juri said she wanted a match today. I wonder if our tutors have been passing notes."

Mary considered the matter. "Probably not. Something must have happened that reminded them about physical combat. Maybe that dust up in front of the mansion." She waved her hands and a gap appeared in the alley. "Anyways we'd best be off."

Renko took her friend's hand and followed her into the darkness, like she had so many times over the years.

Renko scrambled away from the sword. "This can't possibly be safe!"

"It should be fine, so long as you've been practicing your physical wards Renko," Alice said calmly.

For some reason this didn't comfort Renko.

It didn't help that Juri was obviously toying with her. The maid had produced a life sized doll that looked exactly like her, and had assumed a twisted grin to match the doll's face. The two figures had been circling, and darting in and out with sword attacks ever since.

It was creepy as all hell.

For the last ten minutes Renko had been forced on the defensive. She'd been either dodging Juri's strikes, flying to gain range and occasionally tossing out star bullets to try to regain momentum. Nothing had worked.

Finally Juri and her doll (whichever was which) moved close to each other. Renko sprang into action. "Stardust Memory!" she called out, tossing out one of the cards she'd designed. Several streams of star bullets formed and streaked towards her foes, followed by a massive star shot, that while slow and comical looking, had a very confusing hit radius.

There was a massive crash and Renko saw Juri falling backwards. "Yes!" she cried out…

Right as the real Juri dropped down and slashed her across the chest.

There was a hard impact and Renko went flying right into a bookcase, which proceeded to shower her with books. She cursed as one particularly heavy grimoire bounced off her head.

"Pretty good Renko. Your wards obviously survived the hit," Dinah said as she and Alice floated down.

"Your dodging wasn't bad either," Juri said as she sent her duplicate back to its dimensional pocket. "My accuracy is pretty good, even if most of my opponents simply collapse weeping."

"Now, now Juri. You shouldn't brag too much," the mistress of the house said with a giggle as she flew down from the rafters.

"Of course my mistress," replied the maid with a smile, as she sheathed her blade. Flandre proceeded to latch on to Juri's back in a completely unladylike manner.

Renko shook the rest of the books off, then dusted herself. "Thanks for the compliments, but I still got slashed." She checked the tear in her dress where the blade had hit. "Fatally too if you'd bothered to charge the blade."

"Don't be too hard on yourself," Alice stated. "Most melee masters in Gensoukyo actually can't magically enhance their blades as well as Juri can. Remember even as a weak magician you're levels above most youkai. I think you'd do passably well against someone like Rumia or Wriggle even."

Renko cast a quick mending spell then stood. "Yeah, it's just I'm going to be weaker then all of you because I have to match power to power right? Professional magicians need to learn tricks."

"As much as I hate saying it, don't underestimate power," Alice stated with a frown. "Marisa's managed to get away with that for a long time."

"And don't assume tricks are all magical in nature," Dinah added. "Juri beat you through misdirection there. That's one of the specialties she learned from Sakuya. I use knowledge to focus on my targets weaknesses, which allows my weaker magic to affect much stronger targets. Just because magic can do everything doesn't mean you should try to do everything with magic."

"Hm…" Renko thought about that for a moment. It made sense, but she really had no idea what to try as her trick. She didn't really think she had the poker face to pull off the misdirection techniques, and it would be a while before she'd memorized the weaknesses of every different being in Gensoukyo. "It's too bad I can't change the power of my eyes around. That mystic eyes of death perception thing would be kind of cool."

"The what?" Juri asked.

Renko realized she'd just said that out loud. "Ah sorry. From a couple of video games. The guy had eyes that could see "death" as lines and points and could instantly kill people with that. Since I'm pretty good at aiming weak shots I figured it'd be a cool trick."

Alice and Dinah frowned. "Hm… That's a crazy way of seeing things," Alice said.

Dinah nodded. "Best call in the others then."

Renko waited as Koakuma, Marisa, and Patchouli showed up. Those three tended to wander in and out of her training sessions, but whenever Renko asked an odd question to their minds they'd come join what Renko had mentally termed the magician huddle. Normally Renko wasn't able to follow the conversation, but today seemed to be one of the exceptions.

"Hm… Changing your eyes' powers is definitely possible. After all Flandre and Remilia can both use their powers and the standard vampiric charm ability," Koakuma said as she flipped through books.

Patchouli nodded. "True, though for input manipulation you'd have to both know the spell, and actually be able to willing your rewire your brain to fit the assumption you're making. Given that you'll be fine when the spell wears off it shouldn't be an issue, but believing what you're seeing might be difficult. Marisa, you know the most about physical death. What's your take on this problem?"

"I don't see how ya could do that death thing myself," Marisa stated with a frown. "I can't see death as a line or a point. It's more a miasma. Heck, even a timer would make more sense."

Renko found it amusing how much research they'd put into an offhand comment. "Wasn't really that serious. Just thinking aloud about something that would be a nice power."

"It sounds like my power actually."

Everyone turned to stare at Flandre.

Flandre continued on. "Well I can't really see the lines that well, but I can see the point that holds things together. It's not death really, it's where all the tension lies, but if you poke that point the thing goes pop! Like this!" Flandre gestured towards a table, "Kyun!"

The table cracked all through the middle and crashed to the ground. Juri frowned at her mistress. "Please my lady, think of the cleaning occasionally."

"Ah sorry, Juri," Flandre said with a light smile.

Renko looked at the broken table and shuddered slightly. Given what Flandre's mind was like with that power maybe it wasn't something she should look into after all.

Yuyuko watched with interest as Maribel used a gap to dodge out of her servant's reach and return a few weak bullets in return. It seemed Ran's training had focused on skill and defense. Probably good for one as fragile as a human.

Youmi of course was doing splendidly as a trainer. Yuyuko's young half ghost servant was pushing Maribel's limits perfectly. At each pass she started with an attack just strong enough to force the young gap user on the defensive, then she started increasing her power until Maribel was forced to think up a strategy to disengage. Youmu might have become the finest Konpaku swordsman at the end of her training, as she was able to test all of Youki's methods under combat, but Youmi was a fine trainer. It was certain that her heirs would lose none of the Konpaku techniques.

Yuyuko giggled lightly at the irony there. She idly wondered if the yama had more of a sense of humor then most would give the judge credit for.

Ran gave her a look. "Did I miss something?"

"Ah, possibly," Yuyuko smiled behind her fan. "But it's nothing you could have known, Ran."

Ran frowned slightly. "This is one of those things only people who can see people's souls can appreciate isn't it?"

Yuyuko pretended to be hurt by the kitsune's words. "It's not my fault Yukari told me not to tell anyone. But yes, this is slightly related. It should become obvious in a couple of minutes."

Ran didn't look much happier, but she accepted that and returned her eyes to the fight. "Well if I miss it please tell me. I'm a little concerned at how flippantly Maribel's treating her travel powers. She's not establishing as strong a mental connection to the area as she should."

Yuyuko turned her own attention back to the battle "You sure it isn't just a human thing, Ran? Humans can become very used to certain routines. Like riding a horse. The actions become reflex."

"Hm… You might be right. I don't understand human reflexes well," Ran sighed. "But it's still dangerous. She needs to think about some of the more complicated boundary manipulations. Her altering of the boundaries between us when she slapped me could have driven us both catatonic. If she hadn't unconsciously separated our physical and mental states first, she would have turned both our minds into a jumbled, incoherent mess."

Yuyuko felt some mild concern at Ran's statement, but the ghost wasn't prone to strong emotions anymore. "I'll tell her to be a little careful, since it doesn't seem like she needs that power." Yuyuko watched as Youmi switched her attack pattern and charged right after Maribel teleported. "Ah, here we go."

If Maribel had some time to consider her options the rapid counterattack would have thrown her off balance. However, Youmi had gotten careless and just gone straight for the attack. This meant that in addition to panicking and falling on her butt, Maribel tossed out a set of bullets from a gap. Bullets Youmi was now running straight into.

With a jarring skip the white haired girl moved to the side and continued her attack, placing her swords right up against Maribel's throat. "Good Match," Youmi said. "Almost caught me."

Ran's eyes narrowed at the move. "That was too fast even for a Konpaku style master. That was… a time skip? .01 seconds I'd guess, given her normal speed."

"Very good, but then you were always great with numbers Ran," Yuyuko stated. "Some powers are more intimately tied to souls then others, such that even hell's fire can't fully purge them."

"I can appreciate the irony." Ran managed a light chuckle. "I would have never guessed given how carefree she is." Ran stood as the two fighters began walking up the hillside towards her. "I don't suppose Youmu's soul is out there as well?"

Yuyuko tapped her fan shut against her hand. "Actually she got reincarnated a while ago. After all, unlike Sakuya she was already mostly pure, and she hadn't lived nearly as long. But she reincarnated in a very strange place."

Ran glanced at her for details, but Yuyuko didn't want to speak on the matter any more. Fortunately, Ran had to give her student an evaluation before she could bug Yuyuko again.

"So, did you have fun?" Ran asked with a malicious grin.

"I hate you so much," Maribel replied as she rubbed muscles sore from running.

"I warned you about that," Ran said with just a bit too much relish.

Youmi stretched her arms, "Well, you weren't too bad for a newbie."

Yuyuko coughed lightly. "And your own performance, Youmi?"

"Um," the white haired girl flinched. "I'm sorry for getting distracted again Miss Yuyuko. I'll pay more attention, even during training fights. I promise."

Yuyuko ruffled the girl's hair. "Try to take battle more seriously. You're the first Konpaku who managed to avoid being too serious, I'd hate for you to get stabbed."

"Right my mistress," Youmi said with a smile.

Maribel sighed wearily. "So tell me, if you actually manage to get this wonderful spellcard system back on track, why do I need to know this?"

"First, because as Yuyuko said, it would be terrible if you got stabbed," Ran answered. "Not everyone plays by the rules. Secondly, many danmaku fights actually include some physical combat. Some youkai find that more fun. Also it helps you dodge, something you need to master, because unlike Renko you're utterly terrible at physical wards."

Maribel sighed again. "She's better then me at dodging too."

"Well you've got a bigger array of tricks then she does," Yuyuko offered in a conciliatory fashion. "Even if she has gotten better at teleportation, since last we spoke."

"No, I still beat her at that," Maribel said. "Though I feel there's so much I don't understand about my power."

"Don't worry to much about that," Ran said. "It took Chen and I 200 years to learn what we have, and it took longer for Yukari to develop the techniques. Concentrate on the basics. In about 8 years or so we can move on to the advanced concepts."

Maribel just shook her head. "This is worse then my graduate program. Oh well, at least it pays better."

Yuyuko and Youmi looked quizzically at the girl from outside as an odd tone began playing from her pouch. She pulled out a small device that Yuyuko had seen Yukari use before and began speaking into it. "Hey Renko. Got out early?"

After a moment she said, "I think we're almost done." There was another pause. "Hm, I could ask them. Yuyuko and Youmi are here with me though." Strangely Maribel nodded, though the object of her conversation wasn't here anyway. "Okay, I'll ask first."

Looking up from the device Maribel said to the others, "Apparently Flandre's inviting Ran and I over for dinner. And someone from Eientei is supposed to show up." She grimaced slightly as she

turned to Yuyuko. "Er, I don't know how they'd take you and Youmi coming over, sorry. But if you want I can ask."

Yuyuko shrugged. She didn't mind that particular rift that much. She'd never gotten along with either of the vampires. "I don't imagine they have enough food if too many more guests show up, so I'll pass. Thank you for speaking on my behalf though."

Ran considered the matter a moment. "Sorry Yuyuko, but this could be important. You'll forgive me if I go without you?"

"Don't worry about it Ran. I understand." Yuyuko smiled and grabbed onto her gardener. "It's fine, I've got Youmi to keep me company. I'll just prank her."

"Ahahaha, please don't say that so casually Miss Yuyuko," replied Youmi with a weak grin. It really only made Yuyuko want to prank her more.

"Do you want help back home?" Maribel asked. Yuyuko was always amused at how the human asked those questions while Yukari as a youkai had just assumed Yuyuko could make her own way.

"I'm fine. Go ahead with Ran. And if it's Reisen give her my regards and tell her I'm expecting to meet her again soon. She'll twitch amusingly."

Maribel raised an eyebrow but didn't press the point. She waved goodbye then walked a distance away to teleport out. "So I might finally get to meet Princess Kaguya?" she asked Ran as she left.

"Probably not. Eirin's paranoid, so she's probably keeping Kaguya close to home. I bet the princess is screaming bloody murder right now. But I'm going to call Aya and…" And then the two were gone.

"Hm… They seem to be getting along better," Youmi remarked.

"Indeed," Yuyuko replied. It was good to see those two working together again, even if it wasn't really 'those two' anymore.

"Miss Yuyuko, do you think there would be some way for us to fix our relations with the Scarlet Devil Mansion?" Youmi asked. "It would be best if we didn't need to worry about conflict as we moved about Gensoukyo doing our duties."

Yuyuko really didn't care about relations with the vampires, but still… "I don't believe Flandre will ever like us, but perhaps you could have a match with the gatekeeper. I believe she'd appreciate it."

The young girl nodded seriously. "I'll keep that in mind Miss Yuyuko."

Perhaps the two warriors would find an understanding in battle.

Still, Yuyuko thought as she flew home, while the past couldn't be reclaimed, it looked like Gensoukyo was changing for the better. She wondered what it would look like in a few years time.

Author's Notes:

Yes, I'm back and posting again. Once again I've finished this story (except for a few edits in later parts) so I'm expecting to have a new Chapter up every Saturday.

This 'book' is tied a lot closer to the third section, (for reasons that will become obvious about halfway through). It's also darker then a lot of my other works, as my reviewer called it the 'Empire Strikes Back' of the set, though I'm hopelessly addicted to positive endings.

Not too much else to add to the opening. A belated thanks to all who reviewed the last story. It's always nice to see reviews. And in response to the person who asked how this fit into my other works, it is after Cats and Crows, and before Three Days Bright. But most of Three Days Bright occurs so far in the future that there's no direct connection. To give an idea, Heida Akyuu is the ninth child of Miare.

Heida Sen is the 1000th child of Miare. There's one line in the series that doesn't quite match up, but I forgive it, since I didn't plan this at all. This fic was due to an offhand comment about one of the music CDs translations. It just kinda grew from there…

Chapter 3

To find glory in battle is a virtue in the soldier, a vice in the general, and a positive crime in the statesman.

Yorihime focused on keeping her breathing steady. This wasn't the first time she'd be nervous in front of the assembled leaders of the moon, but today was the first time she knew that no matter what she did a great number of people would consider her a traitor. So she reverted to her sword training. Focused breathing would help bring a focused mind, and keep her from trying to listen to the whispers flying around the cavern.

Finally a gong stopped all the chatter. The entire room bowed as Lord Tsukiyomi made his entrance. Yorihime relaxed slightly when she saw he wasn't in battle garb.

Still that just meant they had some support. The debate was likely to be difficult.

She glanced towards the area where her husband Sareseno was sitting. As this was a formal war meeting he had no place on the floor, but he looked like he was ready to help intercede from the sidelines. Another voice, even one known to be biased, would be a blessing.

After proper rituals had been observed, Tsukiyomi gestured for them to rise. Yorihime focused on making sure her movements were smooth. She hoped she was close enough to her sisters flawless performance.

Their Lord spoke. "My generals, the land lost to human incursions has weighed heavily upon my mind. And I fear that the number can only increase if we do not act. Is there perhaps something I am unaware of that will assay my fears?"

"I fear not my Lord," Toyohime said with a bow of her head. "Your analysis is correct. Without some action on our part, the humans will continue to intrude on our pure land, bringing impurity and death."

"However my Lord," Yorihime said, "we have conferred with each other and come up with some possible solutions to the issue. If my Lord would permit?"

Tsukiyomi nodded his head. "Please speak. I am glad to hear your thoughts."

Yorihime started with the bad news. "Militarily there is no way to directly prevail against the Earth's colonizers without tainting the moon with war. Even if we eliminate the humans on the surface of the moon successfully, there will be retaliation from the Earth itself, so direct military action is unacceptable."

There was a great deal of murmuring from the assembled nobles, but Toyohime spoke up before it could grow out of hand. "However we do have two less direct plans that could suit our goals. First while the Earth is at peace, it should be possible to stir up conflict like we have in times past."

"Given the weapons at the disposal of the Earth nations," Toyohime continued, "it's probable they'll destroy human society."

Yorihime swallowed and continued. "The problem being that there is a chance that the human nations won't fall for the ruse." She looked at Lord Tsukiyomi questioningly, and his eyes widened. When he nodded she continued, "We tried this plan on a smaller scale against the nation known as the USSR during the first Lunar incident. An error we added in their technology created a phantom attack. This was in keeping with our policy to only test the Earthlings, not directly start incidents."

"They passed that test and failed to respond to it. Given that the Earth is much further from war today, to have a good chance of

success we would need to do a massive campaign of deception, which greatly increases the chances of being caught if it failed."

There was a pause. Then Toyohime remember she was supposed to speak. "While I trust my emissaries fully, I can only give this plan a 97.5% chance of success. Which is why I suggest the second strategy."

"Which is?" their Lord asked.

Yorihime saw her sister swallow and take a deep breath before replying, "Abandoning the moon."

The crowd was on its feet immediately. "Traitors!" "Abandon the Moon!" "Is it truly that bad?" "Incompetence is what it is! We can wipe the Earth out easily!"

Tsukiyomi clapped his hands sharply for silence. The yelling stopped, but there were still whispers and grumblings in the crowd. "I'm sure everyone is aware of our plans to move completely out of phase with this reality, so I shall not repeat them. However I must ask, why do you believe that to be the only safe course of action?"

Yorihime spoke up first. "Because all the other methods, should they fail, have a great chance of bringing death and impurity to our city. There is no honor is destroying part of the world and still losing our city. It is best for everyone to take the certain path to defend our lives then risk it in bloodshed. Especially since in this instance our test would have to be deliberately unfair."

"I can see great reason and charity in this," Tsukiyomi stated, "however I am not yet ready to commit to an action. Perhaps someone has some words that could shed light on the situation."

Several lords other lords stood, but it was Sareseno's voice that carried through the chamber. "Forgive me my lovely wife, but I'm wondering is there any certainty that the settlers already on the

moon will leave? I worry they may decide to stay if the Earth is damaged enough. Or worse bring the conflict to our moon."

Toyohime fielded that question. "I'm afraid I don't know. We did our best to make sure unimaginative, by the book people got sent to the moon. Sadly this makes their actions impossible to predict when the book gets thrown out."

There was some consideration among the crowd.

Then Lord Tenshou stood up. "That is a worrisome thought. However my Lord, it seems to me that if we stay alert it would be simple to shift to an escape plan if our initial strike failed to produce the results we wanted. Would it not be better to try to save our home before abandoning it?"

There were several calls of assent. None in opposition. Yorihime closed her eyes.

"Ah, I fear something else has just crossed my mind."

Yorihime opened her eyes to see Sareseno looking quite thoughtful. "The youkai. When the world collapses they'll have free reign. It would not be impossible for them to repeat their invasion."

"Tch, then we'll just have to wipe them out," said a lady coldly. "We have the power, and there's no worry about impurity arising from that." Toyohime noticed she too was a descendant of the Tachibana clan.

"Ah, but there's a problem," Sareseon said in apologetic tone. "Eirin Yagokoro lives in the area as well, and she would consider that something of an attack."

There was silence at that pronouncement. No one had any clue what fail-safes Eirin had placed before her departure. For all anyone knew she could press a button and take down all their defenses. It was highly unlikely, but with Eirin anything was possible.

"Perhaps there might be a solution to this problem," said a new voice. A man stood. Toyohime couldn't recognize him but he spoke calmly. "We have worked, in the past, with Eirin. Even after her betrayal. She still shows some loyalty still towards her home, though less so then towards princess Kaguya. It seems to me that it would be wise to enlist her knowledge and aid in making sure the youkai do not overstep their bounds."

There was a ripple of nodding heads. Yorihime could help join in as well. Eirin was far more likely to be keeping track of issues on the Earth. And she was much better at calculating odds then either Yorihime or her sister.

And Yorihime trusted her, for certain values of trust.

Lord Tsukiyomi bowed his head to the man. "Thank you Lord Shimeri. This option could change our understanding of our position, and allow for a more harmonious resolution." He turned to the sisters. "I ask my generals to interrogate Eirin Yagokoro on these matters and present their findings to the court within a week's time for further review. Is that acceptable?"

Yorihime and her sister bowed. "Yes it is my Lord."

"Then I shall retire. I thank you honored nobles for attending my court."

Lord Tsukiyomi left and the chatter picked up again. Yorihime found it to be a bad sign that the only person coming to speak to them was her husband.

Sareseno looked worried as well. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to do more."

"It seems public opinion is against leaving," Toyohime said.

"That's an understatement," Yorihime muttered looking at the breakdown in noble families. It seemed like three fourths were

currently ranting about the Earthlings. Yorihime wondered what would happen if she handed the loudest agitators a hourai tree. She had a feeling she wouldn't like the answer.

"The lord who spoke last, Lord Shimeri. What is his power and rank?" Toyohime asked.

Sareseno thought for a moment. "He's from a family of lesser standing. Descended from high ranking retainer to our own family before gaining nobility actually. His power is the ability to speak with moon rabbits via their private communications."

"Why do you ask sister?" Yorihime asked.

Toyohime folded her fan. "I was wondering what his goal was. But it seems I was worried over nothing."

Lord Tenshou waited patiently in the hallway. His plans required him to be here, so here he was.

Jiyuwan waited patiently beside him. Lord Tenshou occasionally wondered how he'd been so lucky as to receive such a loyal vassal. To say Jiyuwan was the epitome of the way of bushido would be to insult the man. Jiyuwan was older then the nation of Japan - if anything those honorable warriors of the earth imitated him.

The knowledge that such a skilled and loyal retainer was by his side helped when the two people he was hoping to meet entered the hall.

Lady Shoutoku looked at him like a stray dog who had eaten the family cat. Tenshou had no real clue why his sister hated him so, considering that he was going to allow her to finally accomplish the goal that she had been working towards for so long.

Lord Shimeri of course was all smiles, but Tenshou didn't trust him. He knew the man was trash. Still one worked with the tools one had at hand.

"I suppose this is part of some far reaching plan, brother?" Shoutoku sneered. "Or would it have been too much work to press our very obvious advantage?"

"Forgive me Lady, but we lost any advantage we had when Eirin's name was mentioned. People are still too afraid of her," Shimeri said politely.

Tenshou shook his head. "We could have pushed past that objective, but that would not bring us what we want. We must remove the Watatsuki's from their positions if we wish to attack Gensoukyo directly." He looked directly at his sister. "In fact I'm surprised you suggested wiping out the place. I thought you wanted to deal with your target personally."

Shoutoku just glared at him. "And how do you propose to do that?"

"I expect their meeting with Eirin will fail badly," Tenshou said lightly.

His sister stared for a moment later, then turned and walked off. "Whatever. Tell me when I have a part again in your bloody little play."

Shimeri raised an eyebrow, but simply said, "Is there anything I need to do?"

Tenshou nodded. "Yes. It would be helpful if the rabbits remembered that both Reisens were traitors to the moon."

Shimeri looked confused for a bit, then nodded and smiled. "Sure, whatever." He turned and walked away.

Tenshou checked his watch. He would need to address his family at the Tachibana courtyard soon. He turned to go where he needed to be.

As his loyal servant moved in behind him Jiyuwan said, "I do not believe this is the best course of action my lord."

Tenshou mentally sighed. The man was loyal to a fault, but not well versed in politics. "You remember my power don't you? Trust in that if you don't trust in me."

The warrior closed his eyes. "I merely wish I were as certain as you that you truly wish to obtain the goals you claim to seek."

Tenshou paused for a moment, wondering if perhaps his retainer had seen something he hadn't. After a moment's hesitation however he continued forward. He'd been very careful not to leave this up to chance. "I'm quite certain my goals are what I desire."

He gave the swordsman a look. "Which is why you will be on earth in a weeks' time."

The swordsman blinked, then nodded. "As my lord commands."

Everything was falling into place again.

" *When you find peace within yourself, you become the kind of person who can live at peace with others."*

"Are you sure we should use this and not a sealed letter?" Yorihime asked.

"Yes. While Eirin would know if a letter was intercepted, there's not much either of us could do about it. And we shouldn't be showing indecision to her anyway, even if she likely already knows," Toyohime said.

Yorihime nodded. "So I guess it's up to you Reisen."

The moon rabbit nodded. "No problem. What should I send to the other Reisen?"

As Toyohime considered her words another rabbit entered. "Excuse me, Lady Toyohime? I have a message from your husband."

Toyohime was blinked at the rabbit messenger. "Miyari sent for me?" she asked.

The rabbit bowed. "Yes Lady Toyohime. He also asked me to send word to his brother and his wife as well."

Toyohime idly tapped her fan against her palm. Her husband Miyari was almost the opposite of his brother Sareseno. He spent most of his time researching something or other. Usually it was something that Eirin had done earlier, but no one else had managed to figure out. But he wasn't concerned about developing things, just learning for the sake of learning. They rarely spoke, outside of holidays, though she didn't dislike him.

She turned to where her sister and her sister's husband were sitting. "Well that's out of the ordinary enough to warrant immediate investigation isn't it?"

They both nodded. "Anything that would get my brother to leave the lab has to be big news."

"Um, what should I do about the message?" Reisen asked them.

"Just tell the other Reisen we'll be visiting. We don't want to play our hand in advance anyway," Toyohime said reasonably. She didn't suspect Eirin would betray them, but messages could be intercepted and overheard easily. "Then take the rest of the day off."

"Right!" The moon rabbit that the sisters had taken in hopped out to the courtyard to send her message to earth.

Standing Toyohime asked, "Where did my husband wish us to meet him?"

The messenger rabbit looked at her notes. "Um, he said you should meet in the tea room of his mansion.

It took Toyohime a few moments to remember where that was, but she eventually did. "Thank you. We'll head over immediately."

The walk to the 3rd Watatsuki home seemed longer then usual. Perhaps it was because Toyohime couldn't find as much pleasure in the wisteria that bloomed along the way, knowing it would soon be gone. Perhaps it was because the few people she saw bore grave expressions.

The house itself didn't spark any bad feelings, mainly because she didn't know the place that well. Usually she was in her own palace she had as leader of the Lunar Emissaries.

On arriving at the tea room she bowed properly to her husband. He returned the guesture.

Unlike his brother Miyari kept his hair short. His robes were also simpler, though unlike some researchers he never fell into bad grooming habits.

"It's a pleasure to see you again my husband," Toyohime said. "Was there some breakthrough relevant to recent events that you wanted to share with the family? Or did you wish to speak about personal matters?"

"Actually I was asked by Lord Tsukiyomi to give you these," Miyari handed Yorihime and her two scrolls sealed with a quantum seal.

Toyohime opened hers and read it. Then read it again in confusion.

Yorihime of course skipped that part, "We're being fired!"

"You're being given indefinite leave," Miyari said. "And of course, only after you speak with Eirin Yagokoro. Lord Tsukiyomi wishes you to finish your mission."

"Still we're being removed from our positions at the time they are needed most? Why?" Toyohime asked.

"Indeed," Sareseno said. "This puts all our work in danger. Without our wives to try to control public opinion…"

Miyari sighed. "You too brother? Public opinion shouldn't need to be controlled." He looked directly at Toyohime, and she was startled by how piercing his gaze was. She'd never seen him so passionate about something that wasn't science. "Think about where you two stand. Do you really think Lord Tsukiyomi wishes to lose two of his most loyal subjects?"

Toyohime thought about it for a bit. Then she laughed. It felt like a great weight had been removed from her. "Thank you. I hadn't seen it. I guess our position between the earth and the moon was dangerous."

Yorihime looked back and forth before her mouth opened in an 'o' of surprise. Sarenso laughed as well. "Well, it seems we got all worked up for nothing."

"Indeed."

The lunar capitol was, as much as some would hate to admit it, a copy of the celestial realm. And much like the celestials, the Lunarians could do almost anything they pleased, so long as they did it for some common good. A celestial in charge of plagues could kill millions with no stain on their soul, so long as the reason they did so was to continue the orderly functioning of the earth as a whole.

Lunarians had to be a little more careful though. They were not real Celestials after all. They did not have control over plagues and wars. Only the moon.

Toyohime sat down and considered where they'd made a mistake. It had probably been when they'd been forced to start staging accidents. While not an impure act in itself, it wasn't something that could be done for long while still maintaining purity.

Thus there was no way they could justify starting a war with such a massive campaign of deception. Even heaven would find such a brutal run around free will to be shameful. The Lunarians could have no such excuse. Which meant Tsukiyomi really only had one choice.

Which led Toyohime to her question. "So what will Lord Tsukiyomi do about those who have already been corrupted? I know he will not put the battle plan into action, but the majority seems in favor of it."

Miyari frowned. "I cannot say. Lord Tsukiyomi did not explain his reasoning to me per say. Just made suggestions that indicated his opinion of your status."

Yorihime frowned. "Hm… Can you think of anything, husband?"

"I think Lord Tsukiyomi believes the number of unsalvageable people isn't too high," Sareseno said simply. "Your meeting with Eirin will show any action against Earth will be flawed. Thus he will order evacuation. Those unsavable will stay, with their greatest weapons taken and most of the rabbit servants gone. Those who are borderline will have a long time away from humans to regain their purity."

The other three Lunarians nodded at the analysis. It seemed like something their Lord would do.

"Well," Toyohime said. "I must admit I'll still be sad to leave the moon." She took her husband's arm. "We should have a picnic in the gardens while we still can."

Miyari blinked in confusion. "I was actually thinking of doing a bit more research and…"

Toyohime started leading him off. She wasn't a very attentive wife, but one had to do things for one's partner occasionally. "Now now. Research can wait. The moon will no longer last forever."

"Indeed brother. You should listen to your wife," Sareseno held out his arm and Yorihime took it. "Do you mind if we join you?"

"Of course not."

The four Lunarians went out among the peach trees, to bid farewell to their world.

Eirin summoned all the power that she possessed as the Brain of the moon to resist the force pressing on her. Lesser beings had been wiped out by this power, indeed a few times even she had fallen before it. However, this time she would stand firm.

"Eirin, why didn't you inform me we'd been invited to a party!" Kaguya asked with her piercing royal glare.

It helped that the matter was already fait accompli.

"Because it was dangerous." Eirin stated. "The Scarlet Devil Mansion was moderately powerful to start with. Now that the Mistress of the Grimoire and the Black White Witch, as well as their children live there, they're possibly the equal of Eientei. It would be best to scout them before placing ourselves in something that might be a trap."

Kaguya's glare only sharpened. "You sent Reisen."

"Well they wouldn't be foolish enough to attack her alone," Eirin stated. It was a little weak, but the truth was this was almost certainly just paranoia on her part.

Kaguya glared at her for a few more minutes before sighing and slumping down on the table. "I'm so bored. It's getting terrible. At this point I almost look forward to fighting Mokou."

Eirin winced. "Now now, I'm sure if things really are getting better you'll be able to start up expos again. Or at least invite people over."

Kaguya sighed again, and started peeling a persimmon. "Oh well." After eating a few slices she asked, "So do you believe that this girl Ran is holding up as a poster child really does have Yukari's powers?"

Eirin nodded. "It's likely. There's no gain from her lying about who has this power, and other sources have confirmed it. However, I hesitate to assume it truly is Yukari's power. If nothing else I find the chances of a human gaining that power and staying sane to be slim."

"Hm…" Kaguya continued eating. "Perhaps we should invite her over."

Eirin sighed mentally. Hopefully Reisen's return would clear these matters up.

Surprisingly they didn't have long to wait. Reisen entered into the room, unharmed, appearing only slightly confused and carrying a vial. "I'm back Master. Oh, and Good evening Princess. I didn't realize you were here too."

Reisen flinched as Kaguya pointed the finger of accusation at her. "You went to a party! Without me!"

"Um, I'm sorry. I didn't know you wanted to go! I was just doing what Master told me to do!" Then she realized her mistake and looked fearfully at Eirin.

The look on her face made it hard to resist saying 'Punishment Time~' just to watch the moon rabbit panic, but Eirin did have important things to ask. "It's alright Reisen. It's my fault. So how did things go?"

"Um…" Reisen's ears twitched as she thought about things. "The dinner went well. Flandre still sorta scares everyone who's sane, and the dinner conversation was a little tense at times. And the Hakurei Maiden didn't show. But the food was good, and no one seemed to be actively picking a fight."

"So what about the newcomers?" Kaguya asked as she leaned forward.

"They seemed a little too normal for the place," Reisen said, "though I suppose Byakuren's kinda normal too. A few oddities when talking about the outside world, but that's to be expected I guess. They go by Maribel and Renko. Renko's the one studying magecraft, and who has location powers. Maribel is Yukari's reincarnation."

"You're certain about that?" Eirin asked. She found it odd Reisen stated that so quickly. Normally her student was more cautious.

Reisen blinked and looked straight at Eirin, "Ah, well not 100% certain, but she was incredibly similar. Similar taste in clothing, similar appearance, same expression when something doesn't go her way. And she definitely had power over boundaries."

Eirin raised an eyebrow. "And not the power held by the Hakurei line?"

Reisen winced. "No, she's pretty cavalier about ripping holes in existence." Her gaze turned serious. "They both gave me some dark looks. Apparently they went to the moon first, but were thrown off quickly. They figure they were sent here to die."

Eirin sighed. "Ah, Toyohime always did pick the complicated path." She remembered the fisherman her old student had once taken in. "Still in this case it might work out fine. I just hope that doesn't give her Yukari's prejudices against us. That could be problematic."

"Now I really want to meet this girl," Kaguya said with a smile.

Eirin closed her eyes. "I think it might be better to stay isolated, princess."

"Perhaps if we'd never revealed ourselves before Eirin, but that won't work now. If you don't talk to people in Gensoukyo you're likely to get

a witch and a shrine maiden breaking and entering at some point," Kaguya said with a playful smile.

"I think that was a unique time in history," Eirin said. "Still I suppose you might be right." She sighed and turned back to her student. "And the vial there?"

Reisen nodded and held it up. "It's blood. Alice gave it to me 'as a gift.' I have no idea why."

Kaguya frowned. While she wasn't a master of political maneuverings, she was still a princess. "Hm… None of us need blood. Is that a threat, or tribute?"

Eirin rapidly considered the matter, based on what she knew of the people of the mansion. Fortunately, she'd met Alice and Marisa quite a few times before they joined the SDM. "I'd say both and a little more princess. Remember, Flandre certainly wouldn't agree to send it to us."

Reisen looked confused, "Is she saying she's the real power there then?"

"Hm… Probably not so simple," Kaguya said. "I'd guess that she's reminding us that she's also a power there. And that means a lot of different things."

Eirin nodded, happy that the princess was paying attention. "Indeed. This is to tell us they have no shortage of blood so they don't need to expand. It's also to remind us that they have powerful allies elsewhere, in case we get adventurous."

Reisen looked confused by that. "Why would we want some trashy mansion filled with impurities?"

Eirin chuckled. Her pupil had learned a lot, but some prejudices just never went away. "We know that, but creatures of the Earth always

assume the worst. Though to be fair, it's a good survival strategy." One she silently admitted she used perhaps a bit too much.

Reisen was about to speak again when her ears twitched and her eyes unfocused.

Eirin and Kaguya both sat up. They recognized when their servant was getting a message from the other moon rabbits. It was a very rare event. Despite their connections to the Watatsuki sisters they were still technically fugitives. While their exile upon this world was almost considered punishment enough to the pure moon, there would always be a few who sought greater justice for their crimes.

After a moment Reisen's eyes refocused. "Um… Reisen, the other Reisen, wanted me to tell you that the sisters are planning on coming by in a week's time. But she didn't say when they'll show up."

Eirin felt a certain warmth in her heart on hearing that. It meant her students had the right level of trust and paranoia. It was good to see how much they'd learned. "Well I guess we'll have to wait on inviting those two girls over, at least until after the people who kicked them off the moon have visited."

Kaguya just waved it off and smiled. "That's fine. It will be interesting to see the sisters again. And that other Reisen. I assume she'll be coming too?"

Their Reisen nodded. "Yes, she is Toyohime's new lead emissary after all."

"Good good. We'll have to tell Tewi so she can get everything ready," Kaguya said with a smile. "Please tell her to come speak with me, I have some ideas for their visit."

"Yes princess." Reisen turned to Eirin, "Is there anything else you want to know about that or the dinner master?"

"Yes, but nothing you would know Udonge," Eirin said. "Go ahead and find Tewi."

Reisen stood and bowed before running off. Princess Kaguya stood as well. "I should check the finances to see what's reasonable for this visit."

Eirin smiled. It was good to see Kaguya practicing the virtues of a lady, instead of sitting about being bored. "Of course. Have fun, princess."

After Kaguya left Eirin turned her mind to the matters at hand. It seemed things were in motion, but things were always in motion. It was up to her to draw the connections, and see if this was just the normal dance of the stars, the start of a beautiful meteor shower, or a cataclysm in the making.

Authors Notes:

Sorry about the break. My connections where I was Christmasing were not as good as I thought. You'll get an extra chapter up this week to make up for it.

You'll notice a set of new names here. Or at least a few new names. This runs headlong into one of the problems of writing Touhou fanfiction. No matter who you cast as the villain, you're attacking someone's character. I've seen Yukari, Kaguya (?) and Yuka (especially Yuka) turned into blood thirsty monsters. And while these people aren't nice people, engaging in a war of omnicide isn't really fitting for any of them without a little writing work. (Not even 'I joke about genocide' Yuka).

This is not to say it can't be done. It can be done and done well. But this story worked best with the Lunarians as foes. And I'm happy about that, because I won't step on anyone's favorite character that way.

Unfortunately that means I have to introduce a lot of new characters.

Still I'm enjoying plotting them out, and I hope that they don't fail when on the same stage as ZUNs characters. Except when they're supposed to of course.

Chapter 4

" *How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."*

Renko sat on the roof of the house that belonged to her and Mary. One of the nice things about Gensoukyo was the space. A house this size would have been hard to get in Japan. Here in Gensoukyo Renko could afford it even with the money she earned teaching, leaving Maribel's stipend from Ran untouched. Admittedly teaching paid a lot more in Gensoukyo then it did in Japan. A skilled private tutor like Renko was considered a luxury only the rich families could afford.

Renko put those thoughts aside and pulled out the device Marisa had given her after the meal. It was an armillary sphere. Apparently it had been bequeathed to her by a friend. Renko had felt a little odd taking it as a gift, but Marisa said that it was a youkai tool, so she didn't really find it useful.

There was a twist in space, then Maribel carefully stepped out onto the roof. Renko frowned at her. "Didn't Ran tell you off at dinner for using your power too much?"

"Ah." Maribel grimaced. "Not you too, Renko."

Renko waved a finger at Mary. "She's right you know. Abusing your powers like that won't teach you anything. And it's safer to just fly.."

Maribel sighed. "Fine, I'll fly down instead of teleporting." She sat down beside Renko and leaned on her. "So do you know how this thing works?"

"Yeah actually. I leaned how to use one a while back. It helps that I know where the stars are just by looking at the sky. But the constellations are weird." Renko tweaked one of the rings just a bit

to get Mars lined up right. "For example they call all the planets Tengu stars. And for some reason most of the stars are just named on their own. There aren't a lot of multi star constellations."

Maribel leaned a little more towards the device, but Renko could tell it was more to be close then to see. "Hm… Strange. Still it looks like there are some. I can see Orion's belt. And the Big Dipper."

Renko nodded. "Apparently they call the belt Ibuki Doji's belt, and the Big Dipper is the Celestial Dragon." She looked again. "And it looks like they have Myouken Bosatsu, instead of Amatsu-Mikaboshi as the pole star."

"Hm, that's odd." Maribel actually sounded mildly interested in that. "I'd have thought they wouldn't place a god that weakens demons so highly."

"Maybe it really is him," Renko said. "After all we've met Suika Ibuki briefly, and we visited the mountain gods once."

Maribel groaned at Suika's name. "Urgh. Right. Suika. She almost made me hate sake."

Renko remembered that day as well. Or at least the start of that day and the morning after, the evening itself was somewhat spotty. "Yeah. At least we didn't agree to any contests when we were drunk. That could have ended poorly…"

The two lay on the roof a little in silence, Renko occasionally tweaking her armillary sphere.

After a little longer, Renko asked, "So what do you think about that lunar rabbit? Reisen?"

Maribel sighed. "Not sure. She seemed nice, if occasionally arrogant. But maybe I'm projecting."

"Nah, I felt it too. She was like my rich aunt. She knows she can buy and sell everyone, but thinks bringing it up would be gauche," Renko chuckled a little. "But I can't really blame her that much. It's not like half the youkai we meet don't do that."

Renko could feel Maribel shift a little bit, then sigh. "Yeah, you're right." She blinked. "Oh right, I should check the mail."

Maribel reached into space time, through Makai, and out into the small mailbox in the outside world they owned. She fished about and pulled out two pieces of mail. "Junk, and a letter from your parents Renko."

"Thanks Mary." Renko accepted the proffered letter, and opened it, positioning it so that Maribel could read over her shoulder.

"Looks like everything's going well with my family," Renko said, after perusing the letter.

"I noticed they're still asking you when we'll get married," Maribel said with a sigh.

Renko chuckled. "It's your fault for not being willing to show them your powers. I couldn't prove the existence of magic until a year later, so I had to go with the eloping excuse." She rolled over on top of Maribel. "Besides, it's not like it's entirely wrong."

Maribel giggled. "Well, it's more the order is off. We didn't make it official until two years ago."

Renko sighed. "Well I guess I'll have to remind them that going back home and having to make up excuses for where I've been to everyone for the last seven years isn't going to go well."

The two lay there for a little longer before Renko rolled over and stood up. "Well even if tomorrow's our free day we shouldn't stay up too late."

"Yeah," Maribel replied. She stood and started to make a gap opening motion, but stopped when Renko gave her a glare. "Oh right. I'll fly like a normal girl…"

The two made their way down off the roof, and to their bed for the night.

The following morning went by pleasantly, and the afternoon found them wandering through the forests closer to the village. Maribel smiled as a cool breeze blew past them. "I guess it'll be autumn soon."

"Soon? It's fall now."

The two looked up, Maribel grabbing Renko's hand in case a hasty retreat was required. Renko might be able to fight off the average youkai, but that was still dangerous.

The woman who bowed in greeting to them, however, didn't look like a youkai at all to Maribel's eyes. "Sorry, did I startle you? I'm Shizuha Aki, Goddess of the Turning Leaves." She waved her hand, and the tree beside her slowly turned a brilliant shade of yellow-orange.

Maribel clapped at the display. She wasn't certain about gods, but she knew enough about youkai to know when she was supposed to show praise. Besides, it was a pretty impressive trick.

Renko tipped her hat. "Pretty nice. Why haven't we seen you before?"

The woman smiled. "Well it would be showing off too much to personally appear for every tree. Not to mention it'd take forever. Usually I pass through unseen. But since you two seem a little different from the normal humans, I decided to introduce myself."

"Well I'm Maribel Hearn and this is my friend Renko Usami. It's a pleasure to meet you," Maribel said.

"Oh, I've heard rumors about you. Let's see, the witch in training and the future successor to the youkai sage right?" The goddess thought for a moment. "Though you don't look like a youkai to me…"

Maribel twitched, but fortunately Renko covered for her annoyance. "Ahaha, that's a little off. I'm just learning a bit of magic, and Mary here's a human with an interesting power. That's all."

The woman nodded. "Ah, sorry. I mostly get my information from the kappa, and they get their info from tengu newspapers. I guess this time they were exaggerating."

"Huh, didn't think I'd ever make the papers," Renko smirked, "though I knew if I did my work would be misrepresented. Reporters never seem to cover stuff right."

Shizuha giggled. "Well that's tengu for you." Then she looked a little more somber. "Though I am a little saddened to hear that though. I was hoping that the rumors of a fixed Hakurei barrier were true."

"They are," Maribel said quickly. "It's just I'm not a youkai."

Shizuha blinked, then smiled again. "I see. Well, as a goddess I'm not so foolish as to underestimate humans. I hope things continue to go well in that endeavor then." A rustling wind picked up and the goddess slowly took to the sky. "I'm happy to meet you, and I hope to see you again. But right now I've got to get to work. This year I'll show my sister the true meaning of autumn, so be sure to take a good look at the leaves!"

The wind picked up again, and the goddess was gone.

"Hm… In quite the rush," Renko said.

"Well she does have a lot of trees to work on," Maribel replied. She thought for a moment. "I wonder if she paints the leaves of the outside world as well. I'll have to ask her next time."

The two began walking back towards the village. "Yeah. Perhaps we'll see her again." Renko adjusted her hat. "Still, she's an interesting personification of a season. Much more low key then Lily."

Maribel winced. She still remembered the bruises from her meeting with that particular fairy. "Yes. Thankfully."

The two walked along without speaking for a while, letting the sounds of Gensoukyo fill the air.

After a while they reached the more cultivated fields that designated that they were starting to move into the village proper. The boundary of the boundary as it were. Maribel couldn't help but smile at the thought.

A familiar figure rose to greet them as they returned. Fujiwara no Mokou dusted her odd work pants off before waving. "Heya. Have fun out there?"

They both nodded. "Yeah. We ran into a goddess too. Apparently autumn has started," Renko said.

Mokou sniffed the air appreciatively. "Huh, guess that seems about right." The immortal turned to them, "So I'm guessing you met Shizuha? Then I imagine Minoroko will be around to see you soon."

"Minoroko?" Maribel asked.

"Shizuha's sister. Goddess of the harvest. They have a contest every year to out autumn the other." Somehow the immortal's words managed to convey the futility of the contest without judging the people involved. "Usually, when one of them takes an interest in someone the other will too. I hope you like sweet potatoes."

Maribel couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at that. "An interest?"

Mokou waved the comment off. "Gods spend most of their time totally focused on their jobs, so they get bored easily. Also those two

goddesses are fun." The immortal thought a moment more. "Actually, the other mountain gods aren't that bad either, but Shou's far more interesting then Bishamonten. It's just the Aki sisters are extra pleasant, mainly because they're extra weak."

Renko blinked. "They're embodiments of a season, and they're weak?"

"Yeah. Most people don't worship the leaves and the harvest outright. Just give thanks here and there. I bet either of you could beat them in a fight." Mokou paused then laughed, "Not that you'd need to of course."

Maribel considered the oddity for a bit, then remembered she had a question for Mokou, "That's right, we were supposed to meet Princess Kaguya last night, but she didn't show. Is that normal for her?"

Mokou sniffed, then smirked. "Nah. Kaguya would have loved to meet you I'm sure. I bet that was all Eirin's doing. They sent Reisen instead right?" She chuckled as Renko nodded. "Yeah, Eirin's always a pain. She's the one that kept assassinating me to keep me and the princess from our little meetings."

Maribel noticed Mokou's attention starting to drift. While Maribel was very interested in meeting the storybook princess in person, pressing Mokou on the matter didn't seem like a good idea. "Anyway, I'm kind of curious, I've met someone from all of the places Ran's talked about except the underground. Why haven't any of them shown up?"

Mokou frowned, "Hrm. No clue kid." She shrugged. "I know that the only ones that came up often in the first place was the kassha and the satori no one can see anyways, so I never ran into them much. I think it's a youkai thing. Keine would know."

"Would Mystia or Chen explain if we questioned them?" Renko asked.

Mokou thought about that again. "Hm… Don't know if either of them knows the details. Actually Mystia probably does, and she'll probably speak on it. Just don't expect an unbiased view on matters."

Maribel giggled at that statement. "I've learned long ago not to expect that."

Renko shook her head in mock sadness, "Yeah, this place needs a lot of peer review work."

Mokou blinked at the unfamiliar term, then shrugged it off. "Hm, anyway I'd better move along. If I guard the place by just sitting in one spot all the time I'd be no better then that lazy Shinigami." She waved as she walked off. "See ya 'round."

Maribel and Renko waited until she was out of earshot before giggling. "Is there really any need to actively guard the place anymore?" Renko asked.

Maribel shook her head. "Not this far out there isn't. But if she admitted that, she'd have to admit that she's staying in the village because she enjoys the company."

"Well that's not allowed," Renko stated with a gleam in her eye.

"Anyway, let's head back. Mystia should be opening her cart soon."

The smell of grilling lamprey had become familiar to Renko. They'd tried to keep up with cooking, but even with Maribel's loose training schedule there were lots of times where work and training combined left both of them too tired to make some time to for dinner. If they had a refrigerator they could cook something and leave it there, but unfortunately electricity remained difficult to acquire. They'd considered getting a generator, but the noise would be a nuisance in the village. And their attempt to get an ice fairy familiar to do the cooling for them had gone poorly.

So they'd been forced to rely on the large amounts of cash they had to enjoy the local eateries. And Mystia's was one of the nicer mid price range stalls. Especially if, like Renko, you enjoyed the night sparrow's singing.

It also helped that Mystia thought they were youkai in training as it were. Not that Mystia actually hated humans, it just seemed like she felt morally obligated to look down on them. She'd never said so directly, and fortunately Maribel didn't catch the night sparrow's hints on the matter, so Renko allowed the two to remain ignorant of the other's feelings. It kept things a little more harmonious.

Renko was brought back to reality when Mystia flipped the eel skewers one last time, then put them on plates next to the rice she'd dished out earlier. "Order up!"

"Itadakimasu!" Renko clapped her hands, then started in on the meal. Renko had no idea what Mystia used for a sauce, but it was better then anything she'd come across in either world. "Excellent as always, Mystia."

"Yes. The vegetables you picked out today are an especially good match too," Maribel added. Renko figured the fact that Maribel (who was much more of a gourmand then she was) agreed the place was good showed how broad the youkai stand's appeal was.

"Thank you, thank you kindly," Mystia chanted in reply as she moved to start cleaning. "Is there anything else you want, honored customers?"

"A refill on the sake would be nice," Renko said.

"No problem~ "

Maribel shook her head as the bird youkai turned to her. "I'm fine. Though I do have a question for you, if it's no trouble?"

"Ask away," Mystia replied, as she pulled out another small bottle of sake and placed it before Renko.

"I was wondering about the underground youkai," Maribel asked.

Mystia whistled at that. "Ah, you don't want to know about them. They're the youkai no one wants to be around. Disease carrying earth spiders, bridge princesses, oni and whatnot. There's some animal youkai down there, and satori too, which isn't so bad, but they're all a little weird in the head."

Renko frowned. "A satori? Hm… I've only heard a little about them…"

"There aren't many left. And that's even if Koishi still counts as one."

Renko turned along with Mary to see the tengu, Aya Shameimaru, entering the cart with a smile. And a notepad. They'd spoken to Aya several times before, since she seemed to be friends with Ran, but they'd been warned about the notepad. Because usually the camera followed.

Mystia didn't seem thrilled either. "Hey, you better not be bothering my customers!"

Aya briefly glanced skyward. "Relax, I'm not going to interview them here unless they want to mix business with a meal. I'll just chase them down afterwards. And I'd like the special please. With beer if you have it."

"All good then. I'll get your order ready right now!" Mystia ignored Renko and Maribel's glare. No matter how high they rated in Mystia's customer rankings, the bird was still fairly mercenary.

"Don't look so down," Aya said, pulling out a pencil. "I already know the answers to most of the questions. This is merely a formality."

"Then why are you bothering?" Maribel asked. "And why didn't you ask this all before."

"Just because I know the answers doesn't mean I can just slam them together and call it an interview. The people need to hear you directly." Aya shrugged. "As for why I'm doing this now and not when we first met? Well that's because I owed Ran a favor." She tapped her pencil against the pad. "But now the rest of the Tengu are certain you two are the real deal, so I can't let the fledglings get the story out first. It'd ruin my reputation."

Renko considered the matter for a moment. "And because everyone else believes we exist now you won't have to worry about your story being ignored as gossip."

Aya smiled broadly. "Yep!"

Maribel sighed, "Renko, think we can escape?"

Renko shook her head. "Not without owing Flandre a favor. A large messy favor."

Aya winced. "Hey now, no need for threats. If you want to wait until after eating…"

"I don't want to be the focus of Gensoukyo's paparazzi," Maribel replied. "But since I can't escape that, I'll just have to ask some things of you in return."

Aya tapped her notepad. "Let's see, the first will be about the underground. That's easy. What's the second?"

Renko smiled as an idea came to her. She leaned forward and whispered it in Maribel's ear. Maribel grinned in return. "Question number two: What's you're relationship with Ran."

"Ayayaya? What makes you think we aren't just acquaintances?" the Tengu asked.

Renko pointed at the notepad. "Because you said you owed her, and because if you didn't have some connection you'd have gone ahead with the interview anyway."

Aya shrugged, "Alright. No big deal I suppose. Anyway half in advance, half after the interview."

"Mystia already told you about most of the youkai that are in the underground. Pretty much all of them are there because no one likes them, or because they don't want to hang around anyone else. It used to be the hell of blazing fires, but the Yama shut it down when she realized the oni were too easy to bribe,' Aya stated simply.

"It's sounds more like another nation then a group," Renko observed.

Aya nodded. "Yeah. Satori Komeiji and her pets are a powerful group, as are the oni, but the rest are just random youkai. No one of much import." The Tengu shrugged. "Satori wouldn't even be that big a name if those gods hadn't handed her pet crow Utsuho the Yatagarasu as a snack."

Renko paused and stared at Aya. "Wait, they fed a crow the Yatagarasu? The god Yatagarasu?" Maribel asked.

"Yep," Aya stated. "It was dead already, but they let a hell crow eat the body. So now there's a new god underground who runs a nuclear fusion reactor."

"Gensoukyo has a fusion reactor?" Renko asked. "Why didn't anyone tell me this?"

"Because you're tasty with soy sauce, and the underground animals and oni play pretty hard even if they aren't hungry," Aya said.

That was a good reason not to idly drop by Renko admitted silently.

Aya started scribbling on her notepad. "So now that I've answered your first question, on to the interview. I already know how you got

here, and your powers, so please tell me, what are your plans for the Hakurei barrier?"

"Ran and I are going to look into a way to get the border to be naturally fluctuating without my presence," Maribel replied.

"So you aren't planning on becoming a youkai then? Wouldn't that be an easier solution?"

Maribel frowned but simply said, "That's something for later. It'd be better if I fixed the barrier permanently, and I have a better chance of doing that as a human."

Aya nodded. "And do you believe that your relationship with a human is influencing your decision?"

Renko quickly put a hand on Mary's shoulder to keep her from saying something that shouldn't be in the papers. "Actually Alice thinks I'll be able to perform Shashoku within seven to ten years."

Aya raised an eyebrow at that. "I see. It seems I've underestimated you as a magician. In that case… when incidents begin again, are either of you going to interfere?"

The two looked back and forth. "Incidents?"

"Oh, is the shrine maiden getting to be about that age?" Mystia asked.

Aya nodded to Mystia. "Yeah. Two or three years I think." She then returned her attention to her interviewees. "Well back during the last age of spellcards, when the new shrine maiden grew up it was traditional to have a bit of fun. Test her by blocking out the sun or hiding the moon or something. At the start Marisa would occasionally interfere, not that that wasn't fun too. And sometimes other humans would mess around."

"I'd kinda have a problem with people blocking out the sun," Renko said. "Though I'd probably let Kanon take a swing at it first."

Maribel shrugged. "Yeah. If it got too bad I'd probably do something. But if it comes to Danmaku Renko's better then me so…"

"Hm… Interesting." Aya scribbled some stuff down. "One last question. What is it like being the reincarnation of the youkai sage?"

"It sucks. People keep bugging me about someone who's dead," Maribel growled.

"So you have no real interest in taking her position within Gensoukyo?" Aya asked.

"If Ran wants it she can keep it. I'm not playing puppet master," Maribel said before downing her sake cup.

"Thank you very much. And if you'll forgive me for injecting personal opinion I have to say I approve. One Yukari in a lifetime is enough." Aya finished her notes. "Now as to the second question, I suppose you humans would consider my relationship with Ran as being something close to Ex-girlfriend."

Renko choked a little on her drink. "What, really?"

Aya laughed lightly. "Well it's not as big a deal as you think. I'm married to my career of course, but a while ago Yukari tried to set us up. Sort of an omiai, except with more danmaku at the start up. Didn't pan out of course, but it was nice talking with someone my own age, so we became friends."

Renko sighed and returned to finishing off her food. That wasn't nearly as interesting as she'd hoped.

"Ah, this isn't for the interview, but do you two have new spellcards?" Aya asked cheerily.

"I can't really steal anyone else's. Well I can but they'll still be different," Renko stated.

Maribel added, "I've made a few unique ones. And my variants of Yukari's spells are still variants."

Aya smiled. "Well I'll have to take pictures some day. Ah, and don't worry about the unavoidable danmaku rule then."

"Why is it everyone is getting excited about shooting each other?" Maribel asked. "It seems like it'd could get annoying."

"Yeah but it's pretty fun most of the time," Aya said. "People need contests you know."

"And it beats what we have now," Mystia added solemnly.

Renko could see a haunted expression in the night sparrow's eyes, and she was forced to agree. Any annoyance that the dueling from spell cards could cause had to be better then the conflict that created such a face.

However the look soon faded to be replaced by the night sparrow's normal smile. "And if you have spellcards we'll have to have a match sometime. It's been so long since I've been able to show off!"

Renko laughed weakly. "I suppose we could set up a match sometime. It's got to be better then fighting Marisa…"

Authors Notes:

Happy New Year to all. And thanks for reading.

Hopefully this chapter gives another look into how Gensoukyo's changed (again) in the three years since the first book. Before, well, plot happens.

Chapter 5

" *So stand to your glasses steady,*

This world is a web of lies"

Jiyuwan watched his son going through his forms, but his mind was elsewhere.

When he had been young he'd mastered the art of the sword. There were few people his equal, and none truly his better. He did not say that as a boast, simply as fact.

As he had wandered down the path of the swordsman, he came to realize the dangers his mastery created. With that power he could decide the fate of kingdoms, perhaps even bring entire nations to heel. It was a strength that humans should perhaps not possess.

Jiyuwan knew how easy it would for a man of his strength to become a monster. To believe that might made right. So he made a vow, he would never use his killing powers for his own desires. He would only draw his blade in service to another. Jiyuwan would become a weapon, focused only on his master's goals. This would keep his sword from corruption.

Still he shouldn't just serve any wandering warlord. So he had searched all of the lands of the east for a person worth of being called his master. A man who could hold a weapon that could shatter empires and use it only when needed.

He had found that man in Lord Tachibana. Lord Tachibana did not seek power, or even much comfort. He only sought a quiet life of contemplation. It took Jiyuwan some time to get the man to accept his service, but in the end he succeeded.

Because Lord Tachibana was so pure he was one of the nobles Lord Tsukiyomi brought to the lunar capitol. And Jiyuwan had remained

pure enough to follow his lord in service. There was little need for his skill on the moon, but that was hardly a bad thing.

Jiyuwan had served Lord Tachibana until an accident had claimed the man's life, then his son until the invasion. Then his son's son. Never before had he questioned his duty.

Today was different. Today he would take an action that he knew would not serve either the interests of his Lord or the world.

Yet perhaps that thought was simply arrogance.

Jiyuwan took a deep breath and let it go. He'd said his piece. Now he would do his duty.

Turning his full attention to his son's forms he noticed a slight error. "Do not put such force into the parry. Keep it light so you can move to the next block. An opponent wielding two weapons would have put you at a disadvantage there."

His son stopped the kata and turned to him. "But father, don't you use the heavy parry?"

"You shouldn't stop your forms midway," Jiyuwan chided. "And yes, I use the heavy parry, but that's because I am a strong man. You inherited your mother's frame. You must adjust your sword style to fit your body, not hope your body fits your sword style."

The young man nodded. "I'll try father."

Jiyuwan simply nodded in return. As the boy started the forms again he was filled with pride. In truth his son's only weakness was his desire to follow in his father's footsteps. There were errors here and there of course, but there was no such thing as a flawless style.

It was just too bad that his son would most likely learn about combat on the wrong side of the war.

After his son finished the kata Jiyuwan stood. "You performed well Akiyoshi. Continue your training as you see fit. I have a mission to attend to."

"Yes father." After a pause the boy said, "Father, do you think there will be war soon?"

Jiyuwan nodded solemnly. "Yes. There will be."

Akiyoshi frowned. "Forgive me father, but I worry. What if we are given impure orders during battle?"

The old warrior closed his eyes, then placed his hand on Akiyoshi head. "I can not speak for you my son, for you have not sworn allegiance to anyone, but I will fulfill my orders. In the most honorable way possible. Or die in service."

Akiyoshi nodded seriously. "I understand."

Jiyuwan nodded and left. The boy didn't understand really. Hopefully he never would.

In the few centuries that Reisen had been a lunar emissary she'd learned that the hardest part of the job wasn't the magical training, or memorizing transient earth cultures, or even standing her ground against danger. It was keeping her mouth shut when she'd learned something interesting. Especially something that all the other rabbits would be interested in hearing. Like how the Lunarians were going to leave the moon! She'd almost had to tie her ears down to keep that in.

Still all thoughts of that flew away as Toyohime shifted them into the bamboo forest outside of Eientei.

The noise of the forest was different then that of home. The moon was largely lifeless. Here the whole forest crawled with life.

Still it was easy for Reisen to tune that out. Instead she shook her ears and started listening along the wavelengths only other moon rabbits could hear. After a few minutes she heard the other Reisen asking about them. Sort of a homing beacon for the Lunarians to help guide them through the forest.

Reisen pointed out the direction the signal was coming from. "It's that way."

"Thank you Reisen," Toyohime said with her usual good natured smile as she began walking in that direction. Reisen followed along as quick as she could, occasionally remembering to look for youkai. Not that any of them could sneak up on the group given all the devices and wards they had up, but it was kinda her job.

As they traveled Reisen couldn't help but ask, "Um, is there a reason Eirin has Eientei secured against your power Lady Toyohime? I thought she trusted you."

Toyohime giggled at that, but fortunately Yorihime answered, "She trusts us somewhat. I imagine she made that field to keep anyone from being able to teleport in. And given that, there's no way she'd not protect against powers similar to my sister's. Eirin doesn't believe in building obvious flaws into her work."

Reisen mused on that for a second. "Wait, she builds non obvious flaws?"

Toyohime shook her head. "'Flaw' is a bit strong. Everything she makes works perfectly as intended. But usually there's some way around her inventions, or there's a limitation on the user. Just in case someone tried to use her own devices against her."

"In this case the work around is probably 'walk in'" Yorihime added. "Eirin doesn't believe you should teleport into other people's homes."

"Well, it is rude," said a voice from above them.

The three travelers jumped at the unexpected voice. Yorihime was halfway through drawing her sword

when the earth rabbit Tewi dropped to the ground.

"It's also rude to sneak up on people," Yorihime said, while resheathing her blade.

Tewi ignored the harsh tone and simply curtsied. "Welcome honored guests, in the name of Princess Kaguya, allow me to escort you to Eientei."

Yorihime's frown deepened at the rabbits reminder that the house was owned by the banished princess, but Toyohime's expression didn't change. "Thank you very much for greeting us. Please take us to your masters."

"Right this way."

Reisen was always surprised by how collected Tewi was. She didn't seem strong, in any way, but she showed no concern about being surrounded by powerful people. She'd heard that Tewi would lose her cool if people actually started shooting at her from the other Reisen. But the ability to ignore the presence of the Lunarians seemed just strange to Reisen.

Eientei was surprisingly close, and it's well lit halls were a nice respite from the confusing maze of the bamboo forest. The rabbit servants gave them a proper welcome, and escorted then to a set of doors where the other Reisen was waiting. The one they usually called Udongein.

The taller moon rabbit bowed to the emissaries then opened the door. "The Lunar Generals Watatsuki Yorihime and Watatsuki Toyohime, with emissary Reisen."

The room revealed was set up very nicely, each object in the room chosen to show off the owner's wealth without looking ostentatious.

The table was a bit large, but considering the number of people who would be sitting at it, and the importance of the affair, that was to be expected.

There was only one strange decoration. Something that immediately drew the eye. To the side was a single bonsai plant that looked different from everything else. Its dead branch and glittering jewels demanded attention. It was the jeweled branch of the hourai. A plant that could only blossom in impurity.

And it came as no surprise to Reisen that the exiled princess of the moon was sitting closest to that plant. Reisen wasn't a master of symbolism but figuring that out was within her limited abilities. Still it was fitting, as the Princess' beauty easily matched the splendor of any jewel on the tree.

Eirin of course sat next to the exiled moon princess. She was smiling, but the fact that this was a formal meeting instead of a causal one like they'd enjoyed before showed that she was obviously acting in the interests of Eientei first.

Yorihime chose to sit across from Kaguya, while Toyohime sat across from their old master. Reisen followed behind and sat in between them, at a proper distance from the table. As she did Tewi hopped over to Kaguya's side, while Udongein moved to Eirin's side. They too sat further back from the table. This matter would be a conversation between Lunarians. The rabbits were mostly here for support. Reisen was okay with that though. She really didn't need the future of the moon hanging over her.

"It's a pleasure to see you again," Eirin said as Tewi moved to serve tea. "I'm afraid your message didn't explain much, so I'm a little unprepared, but I hope you find everything to your liking."

"Ah, please don't worry," Toyohime said. "It's our fault for asking for a meeting so quickly. Please don't concern yourself with it."

"So how is the Lunar Capitol?" Kaguya asked with a smile.

Reisen couldn't keep her ears from twitching at that. She felt embarrassed as all the Eientei crew looked at her with varying degrees of surprise. Well at least they now knew how out of the loop the people on Earth were.

Yorihime sighed. "The humans have continued their colonizing efforts. There's really no way to keep the capitol a secret anymore," she admitted.

Eirin nodded at that. "It was bound to happen eventually. I imagine human society has advanced enough that the normal methods won't keep them away, but they aren't pure beings either."

"As expected, teacher," Toyohime replied. "That's exactly the what's happening."

"Hm… I'm not sure why you came to speak with us though," Eirin said. "We aren't in a better position to handle things."

"We came to ask you if the youkai were likely to interfere. With either a cleansing of the Earths surface, or with our flight to an alternate dimension," Yorihime said.

Kaguya laughed lightly. "The youkai aren't fighting as often, in fact in many cases they've become friendly again. But banding together just isn't something they do, it's not in their nature. Besides, I doubt they have any idea what's going on up there. We're the ones who know the most about the moon, and no one trusts us."

Reisen had to admit that made sense. There weren't many people who could investigate the moon, and even fewer who could do so without being noticed by her masters. There were probably precognitives among the youkai who could see the moon's actions if it affected them, but if the moon attacked the humans the youkai of Gensoukyo would probably learn about it five minutes later.

Eirin nodded. "Indeed. While a mass conflict would probably cause the youkai to move out of Gensoukyo and fill the world again, there'd

really be no organization. As the princess said earlier it's not in the nature of most youkai to organize." She sipped her tea before continuing, "But you aren't going to take the mass conflict route. I can tell. Otherwise you'd have specified which countries would be taking the most damage."

"So what is your real purpose here?" Eirin asked as she lifted her head to stare at her former students.

The two sisters shifted uncomfortably and looked at each other. Reisen's ears twitched again. There was silence around the table.

Thus Reisen turned her attention to the other two rabbits. Udongein seemed to be watching the events closely. In some cases it seemed she was reading the situation almost as well as her master. When Reisen looked from her namesake to Tewi she briefly caught the other rabbit's eyes. For a moment the Earth Rabbit was staring right at her.

Then Tewi's face reverted to its usual mixture of boredom and cheerfulness. Reisen worried briefly if the Earth rabbit might have somehow pranked her on the way in.

Further worries along that line were cut off by Toyohime speaking again. "You're right. This is mostly just a formality. We need to put all our efforts into studying our options after all."

"Indeed?" Eirin raised an eyebrow at that.

"So you'll be leaving the moon," Kaguya asked. The princess' smile had faded to something that looked more appropriate for a farewell party.

"Yes," Yorihime said. "We fled to the moon before because it was a place we could live in purity, not because of the view. It will be sad to lose it, but we can start again."

Eirin nodded. "And I'm certain you will succeed." She folded her hands. "Assuming you're allowed to. Obviously there's more to it then that."

This time Reisen kept her ears from twitching, but the silence was enough.

"Well allow me to make some wild guesses then," Eirin said. "My guess is that the arrival of the humans spread impurity faster then you expected. I'd further suspect that there are now factions within the nobility which Tsukiyomi doesn't believe he can control perfectly."

Yorihime was frowning by this point.

"So your visit here is mostly theater. Which isn't that bad in itself of course…" Eirin rested her head on her hands. "But if Lord Tsukiyomi thinks it's required, that means there are some people who you won't be able to take with you. And those people might be stupid enough to try your plans on their own."

Toyohime had matched her sister's frown.

Eirin laughed. "Ah, don't worry. You don't need to admit to anything. I wouldn't either in your situation." She thought for a moment. "In fact I think I can help you somewhat. I imagine I'm one of the boogymen of Earth that have appeared in the courts?"

Toyohime managed a wry smirk. "Well Yagokoro-sensei, you do have a way of surprising people. And since most of our best technology is still your design…"

"Ah. They fear the fail-safes…" Eirin nodded. "Yes there are fail-safes, and yes they will eliminate most of your weapons if they're used against Earth. In addition attacking the humans first will only increase the power of the youkai." Eirin returned to her tea. "That I believe should be a sufficient threat to keep people in line."

Reisen was kind of curious as to what the fail-safes were now, but unfortunately neither of the sisters seemed willing to ask.

"Thank you Yagokoro-sensei, that… should do nicely," Toyohime finally said.

"Well, now that we've cleared that up should I send for dinner?" Kaguya asked. "If this meeting is just theater we should enjoy it, should we not?"

"That seems like a fine idea, Princess Kaguya," said Toyohime.

The princess clapped her hands and a bunch of rabbit servants came into the room each carrying plates of food.

As Reisen moved herself forward to the table, she noticed Tewi looked strangely serious for a moment. But as soon as the moon rabbit blinked it was gone.

Still it would be best to keep an eye on the earth rabbit. She didn't want wasabi to magically appear in her food.

A single line streaked briefly though the night sky over the Hakurei shrine.

Hitomi frowned at the sight.

Shooting stars weren't exactly rare in Gensoukyo. Well, small shooting stars weren't. But the shrine maiden could tell that this one wasn't actually a meteor. There was nothing about it that stood out, it just felt wrong. But Ran had taught her to trust in her intuition, and that advice, unlike some others, had never steered the woman wrong.

"What is it mommy?" Kanon asked.

Hitomi quickly smoothed out her frown. "Ah, I just saw a shooting star. Nothing important, Kanon."

Unfortunately Kanon's intuition was as good as her own. "Why are you hiding stuff from me mom? I'm a big girl now. I'm almost 9! Soon I'll be able to take up the shrine maiden duties."

Hitomi smiled and ruffled her daughters hair, much to the young girl's annoyance. "You've still got 3 years of training left my dear little girl. I know you can move the Yin-Yang orbs about, but there's a lot more to being a shrine maiden then that."

Kanon checked her bow before sulking for a good five seconds. Then she turned to Hitomi with a serious expression. "Mommy, why don't you explain what you do when you go out? I know about all the other shrine maiden duties, but you don't tell me about that one…"

Hitomi sighed and closed her eyes. She had been putting explaining the youkai extermination off. She really shouldn't do it too much longer. Even if Gensoukyo adopted the spellcard rules again, there were always a few youkai that needed to be exterminated.

Still Kanon was young. And they hadn't done enough combat training for Hitomi to feel comfortable with the idea of Kanon fighting a practice battle, much less a real one.

She decided it would be best to put it off again.

She opened her eyes and forced a smile. "That's because you aren't going to be doing as much of it. Right now you need to focus on keeping the shrine and learning your spiritual powers okay?"

Kanon sighed and frowned. "Fiiiine."

Hitomi resisted the urge to ruffle the girl's hair again and looked towards where the false meteor had fallen. She wanted to check the place, but she always felt worried leaving Kanon behind with only the shrine's wards to defend her.

A bit of rustling nearby drew the shrine maiden's attention. Her eyes narrowed as she spotted the distinctive markings of a certain black cat.

Hitomi instinctively frowned. She didn't like how that youkai hung around the shrine all the time. However she knew, logically, that the cat youkai wouldn't harm Kanon. In fact the creature would probably protect her daughter.

She let out a small sigh. "I need to go check out that shooting star Kanon. It shouldn't take long though okay?"

Kanon's frown deepened. Still Hitomi was proud, her daughter didn't make a big fuss. "Will you be home for bedtime?" was all the girl asked.

"Yes, unless someone from the village calls me," Hitomi replied. She hugged her daughter tightly. "I'll be back as soon as I can, I promise." She stood up and started outside, but when she reached the door she paused.

"And while I'm out if that cat comes by you can play with her. Just stay inside, alright?"

She didn't like saying it, but her daughters safety was far more important then her dislike of youkai, or her pride.

Kanon's eyes opened wide, then she nodded. "Thank you mommy. I promise I'll stay inside. Can I give the cat some fish?"

"Only a little." With that, Hitomi flew into the sky, before she gave into her urge to glare at the youkai again.

She had something to do, and she was going to get it done quick so she could spend more time with her daughter.

Yorihime shook her head as they left Eientei. "I still don't know how she put a fail-safe on all the moon's best weapons. Especially since I know she wouldn't use anything like a lockout code or genetic scan."

Toyohime nodded. "Yes. Eirin wouldn't pick anything that could possibly be mimicked by an enemy." The older sister smiled. "Still, it won't be our problem. We can figure it out in our spare time."

Yorihime nodded. "Right." Then she sighed. "Still it's going to be weird not being generals anymore. I suppose the moon won't need generals but…"

"Yes. We've held the positions a long time." Toyohime turned back to their pet Reisen. "That's right. I've drawn up paperwork transferring you from the lunar emissaries to my household as an assistant. If you want it of course."

The moon rabbit looked almost shocked at the offer for some reason. Yorihime idly wondered if the girl was just paranoid or if her last master had been already falling. "Ah, I'd be happy to continue in your service! I owe you so much after all."

"Now now, that's nothing, I…"

Yorihime blinked as her sister stumbled, then her eyes opened wide and she drew her sword. Her blade rapidly deflected an arrow purely off instinct, then she stepped back as another sword clashed against hers.

As the shock of the initial assault passed, Yorihime's mind rapidly quickened up to the speed required for true swordplay. She analyzed the situation. She recognized her opponent immediately as the sword master Jiyuwan. Anyone who studied the blade on the moon at least read his works. She'd actually trained with him a few times, even though he preferred straight blades to katana.

Her sister was on the ground. Yorihime couldn't tell from this angle if the arrow was lethal or if Toyohime was simply wounded, but she

was out of the fight.

Reisen had taken a throwing arrow to the shoulder. The moon rabbit was trying to drag her sister away with a single arm. Yorihime was touched by the sentiment, but there was no way she could succeed without hurting Toyohime further.

"Reisen, run!" she shouted, with jumping back to try to get time to summon a god to aid her. She was no match sword to sword, but the man she faced had no serious magical skills, and a known distaste for any energy weapons. Of course a master swordsman could use air pressure strikes, but those were easy to parry.

Unfortunately, he knew his weaknesses as well. He idly tossed two more throwing arrows, one hitting poor Reisen in the leg, the other forcing Yorihime to parry again. He then closed the distance. His movements were perfect, almost silent. Yorihime turned all her attention towards staying alive.

Yorihime blocked his thrust to the outside of her body, then pushed her blade out to avoid the slash he turned it into. She made a snap cut towards his head, but he shifted slightly and cut at her arms, forcing her to fall back into a high guard.

He cut low, and her stance was wrong to avoid the blow. She called upon her flight to get back, but the blade still cut her leg. It was a moderate wound, and she'd now have to spend the fight partially flying to compensate. That would prevent her from getting a solid counter attack in.

She needed a new strategy.

Jiyuwan silently rushed forward again, going for a finishing head cut. Yoriime whirled her blade up to cover her head like a roof in the traditional parry, then tried to rush past the swordsman. For her troubles she got a hard knee to the ribs that cracked at least two and sent her flying backwards.

Exactly as she had planned.

Ignoring the pain from her wounds she held out her blade and called forth, "Guan Yu."

The guardian god appeared in front of her, his halberd unsheathed in his right hand. The god did not pause, but swept his blade straight towards Jiyuwan.

To Yorihime's surprise the Lunarian swordsmaster didn't stop either. He brought his blade up in one hand to block, an effort that was sure to be futile. Sure enough, the mighty god of righteousness' polearm hammered through the weak defense and cut deeply into her enemy's arm.

But his other arm flew upwards and sent three throwing arrows into the air.

It is difficult to truly kill a god that has been called somewhere. But dispelling them is not difficult. The two arrows Jiyuwan tossed struck the god in the chest, leaving it to stare in wonderment, as he switched his blade to his good hand and cut the god in half.

The third arrow had been aimed at Yorihime. She was good enough to ignore the shock of her wounds, tough out a forced dispelling, and deflect an arrow.

She wasn't good enough to do all that and prepare a block against the strike Jiyowon made as he cleaved through the fading deity.

There was another rush of pain. And Yorihime felt weak. There was a final jerk as the assassin twisted the blade to get it free, but that didn't hurt. Yorihime was becoming numb. She saw her sister and Reisen lying across the way, and tears came to her eyes as she realized they were both sure to die now.

She'd heard that your life was supposed to flash before your eyes when you died, but strangely all Yorihime saw was the flash, then a

stream of flames pushing her killer back.

Then everything went dark.

Chapter 6

" *Parting is all we know of heaven, and all we need of hell."*

Komachi stared at the mess below. She'd been really bummed being dragged out for late night work, but now she was wishing she was elsewhere for other reasons. "Um, Shikieiki-sama, do we really want to be around here? That guy just killed a god. Well not fully killed but…"

"'If god stands in your way cut him down,'" muttered the Yamaxandu. Then she shrugged. "We aren't here to judge him today. We're here for other reasons. She looked slightly to the south. "Besides he'll be leaving soon."

"Huh?" Komachi blinked, then turned to look at where her boss was looking.

Just in time to hear a voice yell "Kagazuchi!" and have the forest explode into flames.

In the light of the fire god Komachi could see Hitomi, the current Hakurei maiden, looking around the battlefield. She wisely didn't get close, which saved her from getting skewered by those strange arrows the man was tossing about. And the god she'd summoned didn't care nearly as much about the attacks.

The man stumbled back, and tried some sort of wind pressure technique. Something that Komachi hadn't run across since Youmu'd been around. However with only one good arm it just didn't work.

The fire god gave a few blasts in return, forcing the swordsman to try to dodge. It was hard to Komachi to see, but she thought one of the fire blasts might have winged the man. Between the loss of surprise and his wounds he was at a serious disadvantage.

Just as Komachi thought that the man threw a few more arrows as a screen, then ran further into the forest before taking flight on the strange item that brought him here.

Shikieiki nodded beside her. "Well that's done. Now to do your job Komachi."

"Eh?" Komachi looked down. "But there are still people there. And the souls won't have left the bodies yet."

The yama looked like she was going to go into one of her lectures, then stopped. "Ah, that's right, you haven't ferried a Lunarian before Komachi. Well don't worry about it, I'll go handle the living."

With that her boss flew down towards the ground. Komachi obediently followed. After all it was a bad idea to question the boss while she was still there.

Komachi dropped by the woman who had died first. She was caught by surprise, so she'd be less likely to cling to life. She gave the body a tap with her scythe, but there was no sign. So Komachi sat down. She wasn't the type to drag ghosts anywhere.

Looking up she saw Shikieiki stop in front of the shrine maiden. The woman was hovering over the wounded rabbit youkai in a guard position. Shikieiki nodded to the woman. "You have nothing to fear from us Hitomi Hakurei. In fact I'm currently pleased you've overcome your personal feelings to show compassion to a youkai. However, if you want to save her you'll need to take her to Eientei quickly." The yama pointed towards the mansion. "Go that way, and hurry. Moving her is somewhat dangerous, but leaving her here is worse. The other two are beyond your aid."

Hitomi paused for a moment then simply nodded and picked up the moon rabbit. She quickly disappeared, using both her boundary powers and flight to move as fast as possible.

Komachi sighed and turned back to the corpse. Then her eyes widened.

"Well it seems like you Lunarians leave your bodies quickly," she said to herself as she saw the small spirit bobbing there.

Strangely the ghost didn't project any feelings back at her. It seemed to just be mildly confused and curious.

Komachi stared at the whisp for a bit before turning to her boss. "Um, Shikieiki, something seems wrong with this ghost."

The Emma shook her head. "No. This is what happens when a pure being dies." She nodded towards the ghost then waved the other spirit over. "You've never collected a celestial, so you wouldn't know, but they do this too. A pure being can extend their lifespan without limit, but when they die they can't hold on to their memories." The yamaxandu shook her head. "The path of rulership is not the path of enlightenment. Such is the price of the power we all share. I imagine these two ghosts retain only their names and some slivers of personality."

Komachi looked at the bobbing souls and felt some pity. "Well I guess they won't have to worry about the judging then. Can't we just reincarnate them now?"

She flinched back from Shikieiki's glare. "Stop trying to get out of work. I'm going to use a loophole to let you ferry them both to me in the same trip, so be grateful. Now get on it. I want them in my office by morning."

Komachi sighed and looked straight at the ghosts. "Alright, well you heard the boss. Let's get cracking. I'm Komachi and I'll be your guide across the Sanzu river."

Komachi continued her small talk as she flew to the rivers shore then began ferrying the two ghosts across. She still didn't know why she had to do this personally though.

The only reason she could think of for grabbing two powerful pure souls would be to make more Shinigami, and even with the 60 year cycle coming up next year there shouldn't be a need for two more Shinigami.

Right?

As the rabbits moved to put away the dining sets and rearrange the room Eirin moved to look out the window. The moon sat silently in the sky, as it always had.

Despite knowing the day was inevitable, she was still a little surprised that the day had already come. Perhaps it was because she hadn't been paying attention.

Still it was good to see her former students still trusted her enough to ask for help. Even if she would never be able to return to Lunarian society, it was nice to still have some old friends.

Eirin's ruminations were cut short by the door slamming open. "Master there's a… !"

Then a fireball erupted in the forest.

Eirin turned to the rabbit servant that had entered. "What happened?"

"We heard sounds of battle from where the emissaries went!"

Eirin swore and grabbed her bow. She was halfway to the door when the another alarm rose up. "Intruder!"

Eirin drew her weapon as someone rushed in, but quickly dropped it when she recognized the Hakurei Shrine Maiden's unique outfit. The fact that she was carrying the younger Reisen confirmed she wasn't there to fight. "Here! This room!" Eirin stepped hurriedly into one of the storage rooms and quickly swept a table clean.

As Hitomi laid the moon rabbit down Eirin took rapid stock of the injuries. Two throwing arrow wounds. One leg, one arm. Heavy blood loss. Simple to treat, but she'd need to hurry before shock killed the girl.

She yelled into the hallway "Tell Udongein to bring blood forming drugs and bandages!" Then she summoned a syringe and quickly injected its contents into a vein. "That should keep her from bleeding out." Eirin pulled out a knife to cut the arrowheads off. "What about her companions?"

Hitomi closed her eyes. "I'm sorry. They were dead when I got there according to the woman with the death god."

Eirin's stomach fell out, but she continued working. Millennia of practice kept her moving. She sawed off the arrowhead, then pulled the leg arrow out. Udongein was there to bandage it immediately, so she started on the next arrow. It was out quickly as well.

She then pulled out another syringe with antibiotics to hopefully deal with the fact that this place was far from sterile. Fortunately her medicines were almost certain to work.

She sighed and stepped back. "Someone clean the table, and get a stretcher to carry the patient to a real medical room." She then looked up and saw princess Kaguya looking in with tears in her eyes. The princess shook her head.

"We smothered the fires… but it was too late. I'm sorry Eirin."

Eirin nodded, cutting off her tears. She was head of the household. She couldn't let herself cry. She turned to the shrine maiden. "I'm Eirin Yagokoro. I've heard of you Hakurei Hitomi."

"I've heard of you too." The miko shifted about. "I suppose you want to know about the assailant?"

Eirin looked down at the trowing arrows she'd removed. "Just a confirmation. A single man, armed with a sword? Of above average build with long hair in a topknot?"

Hitomi nodded. "Exactly. He was cut up pretty badly, but he took a passable attempt at killing the god I summoned before running."

There was a snap, and Eirin realized she'd clenched her fists hard enough to break the arrow. Fortunately Kaguya stepped in.

"So it's Jiyuwan. Then Lord Tenshou is responsible."

Hitomi's eye's narrowed. "Will we be seeing him again?"

Kaguya looked at Eirin, who could only shrug. "I don't know. I can tell you not to fight him without help from Ran and at least one other powerful youkai. And even then expect one of you to die."

Hitomi stared at her. "He's that dangerous? He retreated quickly when I faced him, though I suppose he was wounded…"

"Yes." Eirin discarded the arrow fragments. "Fortunately he's a one of a kind warrior. And any wound that would cause him to actually retreat will take at least two days to heal right.."

Hitomi swore. "I guess I'll need to talk to Ran before I go home. I'll be back tomorrow. Give me the full explanation then."

Eirin simply nodded.

"If you want we can send Tewi to talk to Ran. That way you can get home faster." Kaguya bowed her head. "We owe you, for saving one of our friends."

Hitomi shook her head. "I'm the Hakurei maiden. This is my job. Though I will tell her to ask you for the details." She turned to leave, then paused. "I'm… sorry for your loss. If that youkai returns, he will be punished."

Then she was gone.

Eirin considered explaining how Lunarians weren't youkai when the shrine maiden returned, but she decided against it. There was no reason to shatter the miko's delusions.

Someone with her job didn't need to know how humans could become greater evils then any youkai they constructed.

She realized she'd zoned out again when Kaguya put a hand on her shoulder. "I should arrange for the funeral."

Eirin nodded. "And I'll find a way to get those truly responsible for this punished."

Sareseno was getting concerned.

To tell the truth he was past concerned and into gut churning fear. It was something he was very unused to, and he was finding it to be a terrible experience.

Lord Tsukiyomi hadn't just summoned court, he'd called all the moon to bear witness. A big event like that was to be expected, but there was no word from his wife. Even if Toyohime had run off to speak with their lord immediately she should have sent word via Reisen. Normally they didn't keep track of each other's comings and goings, but this was different.

"Brother!"

Sareseno turned to see Miyari pushing through the crowd towards him. Sareseno looked at the expression on his brother's face.

And his heart broke.

He wasn't sure exactly what his brother said to him, but he knew he was to follow, so he followed.

Some time later, maybe not all that long, he found himself standing before Lord Tsukiyomi. He managed to bow.

Lord Tsukiyomi bowed low in return. Too low. "I… I have failed you. I have failed my generals, and to my eternal shame they have paid the price."

Then he said the words Saresano had know were coming. "An assassin slew both of them on earth." The Lord who had taken his people to the moon, who had escaped the earth's corruption and the death it brought, clenched his hands in fury at his impotence. "They wanted me to suspect Eirin of course. But I can't contact her or any of my own personal spies on earth, despite the two still being connected. The traitor has to be on the moon."

He bowed low again. "This was all due to my failures. I am sorry."

Miyari seemed to have shut of his emotions at the revelation. The iron embrace of logic was what he turned to in times of trial.

Sareseno just felt lost.

His mind was well enough to remember the formalities at least. He bowed. "It was not your fault there are traitors. Yorihime accepted your service knowing the risks, and I'm sure Toyohime did as well."

He wished he could say more. About their deaths not being in vain, or how they would be remembered. But for the first time he could not summon the words. It was too big a lie.

Lord Tsukiyomi shook his head again. "I wish I could offer you some repayment, or justice, but I have nothing. I must see to my people first. And to save them we must flee without battle."

Miyari replied, "I understand my Lord. Do what must be done."

Sareseno simply nodded silently.

The two brothers watched from the wings as Lord Tsukiyomi ascended to the dais. For the first time Sareseno noticed the man looked old.

The Moon's ruler raised his hands for silence. After a few minutes he began. "People of the Lunar Metropolis. Listen to my words."

"In the early days of the history, when the second living thing crawled up out of the sea to eat the first the Earth has been tainted with blood. That impurity brought death to all things in time. The impurity of conflict and desire corrupted the once pure Earth, and all living things bore its taint."

"We Lunarians realized the corruption, and fled the earth. Leaving behind our nations and worldly power to obtain a pure land. The moon. A land untouched by the need of living things to kill. Here we abandoned our humanity, becoming the equal of the gods."

"For centuries we lived in peace. The taint of blood came only 4 times to the capitol, and each time it was quickly removed."

"Now however that has changed. The humans have come to our moon, and instead of leaving as we had hoped they have set up a base here. Bringing their desires, their needs, their tainted blood to our moon. So we asked ourselves what we should do."

Lord Tsukiyomi's face fell. A ripple of whispers spread throughout the crowd.

"We failed… I failed to see the true threat. I sent my best generals to earth to ask what to do with the human menace. And on earth they were slain."

Tears welled up in Sareseno's eyes. And it was now shock and horror circulating the crowd.

"I wish I could tell you of their deaths. But I cannot. My attempts to learn of the dead magically were blocked, and my contact with our

informants on the planet were interrupted as well. The only reason I know of their deaths was because the assassins were prevented from covering up the location magically somehow."

Lord Tsukiyomi drooped. "But given how exact the blackout is it could only have occurred at the hands of a traitor on the moon itself."

Lord Tsukiyomi had to pause as the outbursts became louder. Sareseno noted most of the anger and grief seemed genuine. It was small comfort.

After a few moments their lord continued. "I know many of your hearts cry for justice, to find this criminal and execute them. And I understand this drive, because your hearts are pure. But I fear that will only give the assassins victory."

"For there must be multiple conspirators to accomplish so vast a plan. Which means to find and punish them would require a civil war." Sareseno noticed how Lord Tsukiyomi emphasized the words, silencing the crowd before they even started.

"A civil war can only bring the taint and corruption of the Earth to the moon, no matter who was victorious. Perhaps it might be possible to clean that impurity away, like we did after the youkai war."

Once again the mighty lord's voice fell and he slumped. "But I find I cannot believe that."

There was a long silence.

Lord Tsukiyomi drew himself up to his full height. "That is why I hereby abdicate my position, on the execution of one final order. Any who wish to follow me into the alternate dimension retreat are to be allowed to leave with their full possessions and their servants."

He looked down to the ground. "I love the moon. But I love my people and my ideals more. I can not demand you abandon this place, or not seek revenge. But that is not my path."

Sareseno watched in awe as Lord - no Tsukiyomi - placed the regalia of rulership on the dais then walked away.

The court erupted in chaos. Accusations flew from some. Questions from others. A good number simply walked away, probably to get their households in order for the move. If Tsukiyomi felt the moon could not be saved, it could not in their minds.

"My fellow nobles! If I may speak!"

Sareseno felt a stab of emotion pierce his heart. It wasn't much, but he felt hate as he looked down on where Lord Tenshou stood.

There was no sign of panic on the man's face. In fact the noble radiated purpose. It was obvious to those who had been faltering.

"I understand Lord, that is, the former Lord Tsukiyomi's worries. But can we really just abandon our land like that?" He waved his hand at the city, and the orchards. "While I admit I came into conflict with the noble Watatsuki sisters in the past, can we really let their murderers just go free! Especially if their goal was to force us to flee our home? Is it not a just and righteous thing to defend your land against impurity while you still have the chance of victory, instead of running in defeat?"

"But Lord Tenshou," a lesser noble asked, "If we taint the moon we'll have lost all of that for nothing, at the cost of millions of lives."

"The lives of earth creatures are meaningless. And we've cleansed our city once before, when the youkai brought death to our halls." Lord Tenshou stood up straight. "Did we flee then? No, we just repaired and rebuilt!"

"And foolishly let the culprits escape unpunished," said a woman with hate in her eyes. Sareseno noted that it seemed to be directed equally at the people she was speaking about and Lord Tenshou himself.

"Indeed. This time we will not make that mistake!" Lord Tenshou nodded. "This time we shall make sure the earth will not bring taint to our land once again."

Sareseno felt a tug on his arm. Miyari stood there, still expressionless. "Come brother. It's time for us to leave."

Sareseno shook his head. "I must see this. Perhaps then I will understand."

Miyari shrugged and walked away.

The debate took three hours. Some left when it became clear they were not going to rule in the new order. Others left when Lord Tenshou insisted Eirin had to be among the conspirators, as she would have stopped any ambush she opposed. Still more left for reasons Sareseno could not see. In the end less then half the moon's Lunarians stood in the room. Yet they all cheered as Lord Tenshou picked up the regalia Tsukiyomi had left behind, and swore they would avenge themselves on the "guilty."

And Sareseno was no closer to understanding then he was at the start.

"Ran Yakumo!"

Ran looked up in surprise at the call. She quickly arose from her kotatsu and strode into the night. She looked up at her uninvited guest. "I never expected you to come here." She looked at the shrine maiden quizzically. "In fact how did you get here? I'm pretty sure I never showed you."

"I learned a lot of things you should have taught me on my own," Hitomi said as she landed. "But that's not important right now. There were two Lunarians killed by a Lunarian assassin in the Bamboo forest."

Ran stared at Hitomi. "Are you certain? Perhaps it was a shape shifting youkai."

"Well the man tried to fight a god. And the banished one, Eirin, seemed to know who it was," Hitomi frowned. "He escaped before I could finish him off so I can't be certain myself. He was very hurt though."

"I see…" Ran thought over the matter. "How bad would you say?"

Hitomi thought for a moment. "His right arm was effectively useless, and he had burns on his chest and leg. He must be good though, because he didn't seem impaired by the pain at all."

Ran nodded. "Lunarian medicine isn't good enough to fully recover from that in a day, so we should have a reprieve. If there is some internal conflict they'll probably target Eirin, but we should still be cautious." She turned her gaze fully on Hitomi. "You should perform a strengthening ritual on the barrier tonight, just in case."

Hitomi didn't look pleased at the order, but she simply nodded. "Very well. And tell me what you learn from Eirin."

Ran folded her arms. "Indeed. In fact I think I'll grab Maribel and Renko as well."

Hitomi blinked. "I understand Maribel, but why Renko?"

"In addition to her connections to the SDM she's just clever," Ran looked up at the sky. "And given we don't have a clue what's going on we'll need someone clever."

Author's Notes: Guan-Yu is the ascended general from the three kingdoms period who became the god of righteousness. Kagazuchi is the Shinto god of fire, who was cut into pieces by Izanagi after his birth caused the death of Izanami.

Chapter 7

" *Sometimes I think it should be a rule of war that you have to see somebody up close and get to know him before you can shoot him."*

Lord Tenshou sat uncomfortably on the throne.

In truth he didn't want to rule the moon. He knew, on some level, that he lacked the temperament for a supreme ruler. He believed in his skills as an organizer, a diplomat and a general, but the raw charisma required to keep a group of nobles in line was something he lacked.

He'd never actually wanted to replace Tsukiyomi. He'd hoped that the war would start on its own. But it seemed that wasn't going to happen. Years of relative peace had sapped the will of the Lunarian people for war. Even Lord Tsukiyomi himself had chosen to run away. Lord Tenshou would only have been mildly irritated by their cowardice, if it were not for the fact that they were taking most of the best warriors with them. He could still win of course. But it would be more time consuming.

A better ruler would have been able to unify the moon without stepping on toes. The best ruler would have been able to get Lord Tsukiyomi to abdicate in their favor.

He shook off that feeling though. In time someone with those abilities would come to replace him. Until then he would rule. For the sake of his cause.

He turned to his new general. "Jiyuwan, how many people have stayed?"

"Slightly less then half of the moon, as expected," the swordsman replied without expression. An impressive feat given his arm was still

mending. "However, I fear that the number of combatants we have is only about 150."

Tenshou frowned at this news. "I see." He allowed his voice to carry to the nobles in the court. "I had hoped that more people would be willing to defend their home, but it matters little. So long as we use purification weapons there will be little actual battle."

"Still it means that we must secure our home first. Lord Shimeri?"

His co-conspirator bowed. "Yes?"

"I assume you have the plans the Watatsukis developed for the elimination of the human menace?" Tenshou asked.

"I do. They can be implemented within the hour."

Lord Tenma nodded. "Then unless there is a reason to hold the matter?"

He scanned the faces of the crowd in front of him. There was no dissent.

"Then begin."

Humanity is surprisingly resilient.

For years they've had the ability to eliminate themselves from Earth with the simple press of a button. The weapons involved have changed, from crude fission bombs, to fusion weaponry, and on to satellite beams and other devices which have "minimal long term environmental impact," but they still are immensely powerful, and they're still easy to call. The people involved usually made pressing that button somewhat difficult, but it was never as hard as destroying most of a planet should be.

And they seemed to take a perverse pleasure in holding their fingers over those buttons. Even without outside intervention the 'Cuban missile crisis' nearly wiped the slate clean on humanity. And humans have continued their brinkmanship on and off until the present day.

However, every time the world stand ready to destroy itself, the human mind seems to suddenly kick in and people start actually thinking. The buttons that are so easy to push physically seem to be much harder to push mentally. It seems that when faced with utter annihilation, people suddenly want extra information and clarification about their orders. A tiny little voice speaks up and says, "Maybe I should check that before setting civilization back to the stone age. Just in case."

Which is why the Lunarians assault targeted so many people worldwide.

To their credit, some of the moon rabbit emissaries refused to act on their orders. A small few refused to go at all and were, sadly, executed for their defiance. More just couldn't bring themselves to kill billions, and hid on the earth, knowing that even if they survived they'd be hunted down later as traitors.

Still most completed their job. Rabbits aren't known for bravery when it comes to other's lives, and quite frankly, it's unlikely humans would have done much better.

Thus all over the world computers started seeing threats that didn't exist, attack satellites showed their neighbors activating weapons, submarines received launch orders out of nowhere, and radar started showing missiles in flight when they were in fact on their platforms.

Most of the owners of these systems did the right thing, calling to confirm the situation and warn their commanders. Across the world, the leaders of humanity began calling each other, trying to find out what was happening.

However there were a few commanders, and a few countries, that didn't react as rationally. They saw the threat, and they saw their enemies on alert, and they assumed the worst.

No one knows who fired first, or if they each decided on their own to attack, but that really didn't matter in the end. Once the first shot was fired it was over.

As actual attacks started, and casualties rolled in, people stopped hesitating. Retaliations went off, alliances came into play…

And the world of man disappeared in flames.

Alice sent Shanghai to grab one of the library books and put it back on the shelf. Technically she should let Juri do that, but it seemed weird to have your daughter picking up after you. Especially since everyone was in the library this evening.

She was about to pick out another book when suddenly there was a pop and her head started ringing. Like she'd flown too high and her ears had readjusted to the pressure.

For others the effects were more pronounced.

Koakuma staggered drunkenly then crashed to the floor. Dinah slumped in her seat. And Alice's blood turned to ice as Flandre hissed, her eyes glowing blood red.

Then it stopped. Flandre blinked and looked around curiously, her wings tinkling. Koakuma sat up and shook her head and Dinah grabbed a glass of water and downed it.

Marisa said what they were all thinking. "What the fuck was that?"

Elly grabbed her friend Kurumi as the vampire reeled. "Kurumi, are you alright?"

The vampire shook her head. "So much fear. So much power… And the disbelief is fading…"

Elly was about to reply when the massive doors to the mistresses chambers opened up. The two lesser youkai stood straighter as Yuka Kazami wandered out and yawned.

"Ah, I thought you weren't going to wake for another year, mistress," Elly said.

"Something interesting has happened," the powerful youkai replied. "And I think I want to see it in person."

Hitomi was staring moodily outside. They'd collected the ingredients for the barrier sealing ritual but it had to start exactly as a double hour began. With the double hour of the Dragon halfway done she'd have to wait for the double hour of the Serpent to start to begin the ritual. Thus all she could do now was wait and brood.

"Ah, are you worrying about the leaves too, mommy?"

Startled from her reverie she looked back at her young daughter, who had thoughtfully grabbed them both some tea. "Leaves?" she asked as she took the proffered cup.

Kanon nodded. "Well the leaves will be turning soon, and that's always pretty. But then they start falling off and we have to sweep…"

Hitomi blinked then laughed. "Ah, well that's not as big a deal." She sipped her tea. "I'm afraid my trip didn't go as well as I would have liked. I couldn't help some people."

Kannon frowned. "But it wasn't your fault right? I know, because you always try your best."

Hitomi smiled. "Thank you Kanon."

She sat there for a moment thinking of a way to explain events to her daughter when the world rippled before her.

She had her amulets out in a second, but there was nothing to fight. Just a new space that had replaced the back of her shrine. A landscape of strange gutted buildings and silent machines. There was little sign that greenery had ever existed there, and no signs of life.

At the same time the ripples finished Hitomi felt a great emptiness run through her. As if a piece inside of her had vanished. Kanon whimpered and grabbed on to her arm. "Mom, something bad's happened…"

Hitomi nodded. Then slowly stood. She carefully walked to where the barrier's field should begin to confirm her suspicions, while Kanon trailed along with her.

Just as she thought there was nothing where the Hakurei barrier was supposed to be.

Hitomi shifted her guard as the space beside her ripped open and Ran and Chen jumped out. However the two youkai gave her only the barest of nods before staring at the city before them. "Chen, go run and try to confirm what happened."

"Right on it!" Chen said before zooming off.

Hitomi moved to face the kitsune. "Ran, what's going on!"

"You know as much as I do." Ran pointed at the world outside. "The Hakurei barrier is gone."

"But how!" Hitomi yelled. "That shouldn't be possible. The barrier falls if my line ends, the dragon's power fades, or if someone breaks it. I'm still alive. The dragon is right there," she said pointing to where the big dipper was in the sky, "And I didn't feel anyone attacking the barrier!"

"You missed the most important part," Ran said. "The barrier is the boundary between belief and disbelief." Ran looked over the ruined city. "I fear that something happened to the outside world that would make them find a world of monsters and gods believable."

"Which means the Hakurei Barrier no longer has a purpose. It's gone for good."

The emptiness in Hitomi's chest filled her whole body.

She felt Kanon tug on her sleeve. "Does that mean we don't have a shrine anymore?"

Hitomi looked at the building that had been her home for most of her life. The 'secret' had always been that the shrine was dedicated to the spirit of the barrier itself. Now its power was gone. What happened to gods of places that no longer existed?

She slumped down. "Damn it."

Then she stared at Ran. "Damn it! What have I been doing with my life then! What's been the point of the last thirty years! All those deadly fights. The years with only occasional visitors. It was all a waste!"

Ran looked shocked, then her expression turned to fury. "Thirty? Try three hundred! I've sacrificed my pride, my reputation and my friends to protect this damn barrier! And you humans manage to break it all in a second!"

"We humans! I didn't do a damn thing!" Hitomi drew herself up. "And why are you here at this abandoned shrine anyway youkai! Our…"

"Stop it!"

The two turned to where Kanon was standing in tears. "This was our barrier right! Both of ours. So that means someone else did this. We should find them and punish them, not fight each other!"

Both Ran and Hitomi's faces fell. "I don't think it's going to be that easy honey," Hitomi said.

Ran nodded. "She's right. I'm afraid this can't be fixed. And… it's not really anyone's fault." She sighed. "I'm sorry for blowing up on you though. I should have been prepared for this." Ran sighed. "Anyway, I'm going to go make sure nothing in the area is dangerous."

"More dangerous then the youkai normally are?" Hitomi asked.

Ran smiled weakly. "Probably not, but I want to make sure." The kitsune flew off.

"Be careful Aunt Ran!" Kanon called after her. Hitomi felt a tinge of pain at the familiar words, but she wasn't going to correct her daughter. Especially not now.

So instead she said, "Kanon why don't we fly up and look around? That way we can see what's changed."

"Sure mommy!" The little girl focused intently and slowly began hovering up. For some reason Kanon wasn't all that good at flight yet, but Hitomi was sure she'd learn soon. She followed her daughter up, then looked over the new landscape.

There were other mountains all around now though Youkai mountain seemed incredibly tall in comparison. To the West Gensoukyo looked relatively unchanged, though Hitomi was sure she could see a few spots where a building had appeared from the outer world.

To the East everything was different. It was a ragged set of buildings that looked to be about twice the size of the human village, and it was obviously only part of the city. It looked like the center had been to the west, where Gensoukyo now sat, and the burn marks across the city indicated something had hit that center hard. Hitomi was very glad they hadn't been around for that.

"Do you think anyone's still alive in the city?" Kannon asked quietly.

"I don't know," Hitomi replied. After a moment she added. "But if there is hopefully Ran or Chen will find them."

"Damn. What a mess."

Hitomi looked up to see another flier approaching. She recognized the black and white outfit immediately. "What are you doing here?"

Marisa winced at the greeting. "I came to see what happened." She paused a safe distance off and scanned the broken landscape. "Looks like Patchouli was right. But how the hell'd that happen?" She sighed and turned to where Hitomi was still watching her warily. "You two going to be alright with the barrier down?"

Hitomi kept herself between Kanon and the witch, no matter how much her daughter tried to worm around her. "I can still summon other gods. And the power over boundaries is innate to our blood. Don't think we're easy prey."

"That's good. Doubt anyone will mess with you over this but I'd hate to see your family lose everything," Marisa said while moving forward to poke at a partially melted bicycle.

"Haven't lost everything? Sure, we've still got a magic power no one needs, the ability to summon gods we can't repay, and a shrine that's situated in such a poor location that no one goes to it," Hitomi realized Kanon was looking at her worriedly and tried to calm her voice. "We'll probably have to close down the shrine in fact. The only reason it was staying afloat was because Ran was giving 'donations' to keep us afloat."

Marisa looked sheepish. "Um, actually that was me."

Hitomi blinked. "What?"

"But aren't you supposed to ring the shrine bell when you donate?" Kanon asked.

Marisa shrugged. "Yeah well… I made a promise to Reimu. And I want to keep it." She looked away, but Hitomi could tell the witch was blushing. "Anyway that's not important! The important thing is I'm wondering if you need any help."

Hitomi frowned. "If you want to make donations that's your own business, but I'm not a charity case. Give to the shrine, not to my bloodline."

"What's the difference mommy?" Kanon whispered to her.

Hitomi frowned a bit. "We're supposed to serve the gods, not ourselves," she said quietly while keeping her eyes on the magician. Then she sighed. "Though I suppose now we don't have a god."

Marisa laughed at that. "How times change." The witch shrugged. "Well seems to me we still owe the barrier some respect. After all it did its job. It kept magic safe until the world accepted it again. I think it deserves a break."

"I like the shrine too mommy," Kanon said.

Hitomi looked back to the weather beaten shrine. "I suppose it has been a good home."

"And if you ever need help keeping it up you can give me a call. I've got a lot of memories here," Marisa said.

"We can take of ourselves," Hitomi replied. She didn't want to end up further in this woman's debt.

The witch sighed. "Alright." She then took off and started heading towards the devastation. "Anyway this place looks like a mess. Feel sorry for all the poor bastards who lived here. Might want to say a ritual for their souls." The witch tossed a gold coin behind her. "On me. Don't want them angry as I inspect the place for artifacts."

"Proper rites don't give you the leeway to go grave robbing!" Hitomi shouted after the witch, but she was ignored.

She sighed and turned to Kanon. "She's right in that we should do rituals for the departed. We can use the incense from the barrier ritual for it too. I'll grab that, you get the gohei, alright?"

She'd do her job now and worry about the shrine later. Maybe sometime along the way she'd have an idea on how to live life as a miko of a godless shrine.

"Yes mom," her daughter replied. The little girl's wonder was starting to give way to sorrow over the lost lives. Even though neither of the miko had known anyone who had died.

"It's a good thing this is mostly academic to me," Hitomi muttered as she headed back inside.

Chapter 8

Maribel dropped the glass she was holding with a dull clunk on the table. Renko looked up at her in surprise as her friend stared into space. After a moment she quickly stood and moved to Mary's side. "What's wrong?"

The words seemed to snap Maribel out of her daze. "The barrier. It's gone."

Renko's eyes widened. "What!" She tried a simple spell, but felt none of the resistance that she should have in the outside world. "But magic's working just fine, Mary."

Maribel shook her head. "I just know it's down. I can feel it."

Renko frowned. "Okay let's fly up and take a look. We should be surrounded by city if the barrier is gone, right?"

Maribel nodded. "Right. Let's take a look."

Renko followed Maribel out of their house and then took to the sky. The stars were still clear, and as they got above the height of the shrine there were none of the lights that would indicate a city.

"See Mary, there's no way that the barrier is do…" Renko's voices caught in her throat as she stared in horror.

The false dawn of a nuclear explosion had appeared over the horizon.

"Oh god…"

The glow was slight. Hidden behind the mountains that surrounded the valley of Gensoukyo still. But there was no mistaking that horrible light.

As it slowly faded Renko began to realize what that meant.

"I don't believe it," she choked out.

Maribel nodded. Then she gasped. "Mom and Dad!"

Renko swore and dove after Mary as she ripped a hole in reality and moved through it. There was a moments disorientation as they moved through the gap then the two burst back into reality over Okaya.

The city was in ruins. Some parts still burned. The lake that had separated the town from its sister city smoldered as well as if it had been brought to boil. 'Satellite weapon' the last analytical part of her brain remarked.

Maribel gave a thin wail and disappeared.

Renko was too slow to follow her through the gap but she knew where her friend was going. She quickly flew down to a place she'd visited often, but never enough.

Maribel was there.

The black ruins stood in silent tribute to the fact that there had once been a house there. It had been a beautiful house, with flowers in the windowsills, and a western style porch. There was no sign of the rocking chair that once sat there. Next to her was a blacked tree trunk, a poor marker for where a once proud Jacaranda had spread its leaves. Across the street a twisted swing set creaked and popped as it cooled in the breeze, behind the burnt line of a fence.

Mary was on her knees rocking back and forth, sobbing so hard she could barely breathe.

Renko moved to her love and embraced her as tightly as she could. "I'm here Mary. I'm…" She sniffed and tried to start again. "It's…"

Then she couldn't take anymore. She began crying.

It wasn't alright.

Their old world was gone forever.

The two sat there, in the light of guttering flames until a explosion of a distant refinery shook them out of their stupor. They managed to pull themselves up, but Mary couldn't seem to turn away from the house.

"I can't find them," she said in a weak voice. "I can't even find their bodies."

Renko looked around at the devastated neighborhood. "I'm sorry Mary. We don't even know if there were here…"

Maribel shot up. "That's right. Maybe they were out driving. Or took a vacation. I can find them!"

"Mary, it's… !" but Maribel was off again. Following some boundary only her eyes could see. Fortunately this time she was flying, so Renko could follow behind.

Maribel was pursing whatever she saw frantically. Renko almost told her to slow down, but she caught a glimpse of smoldering figures on the streets below and sped up herself. She felt sick. Maribel didn't need to see that.

Their hurried flight took them to the edge of town where a strangely familiar shrine sat. In the courtyard were two figures. Living figures! The two women swooped down towards the scene.

Then they stopped as they got close enough to see.

The mountain god Kanako was holding an old woman on her lap. She looked mostly unscathed but Renko could see that Kanako was holding the woman's hair in place. Radiation poisoning.

Kanako glanced briefly up but turned her attention back to the woman just as quickly. "There. Do you feel any more pain?"

"No Princess Yasakatome. The pain is gone. Thank you." The old woman let out a few rasping breaths. Then fell still.

Kanako sighed then put the body down. Standing up she turned away from the girls to look at the broken down shrine.

"Why?"

Renko turned to Maribel.

"Why couldn't you have done something? What's the point of gods if they can't help people?" Maribel asked.

Renko expected anger, but Kanako just shook her head.

"What use is a god who no one calls for help?" asked Kanako softly. "What is the point of a god who no one needs until after everything is gone?"

Renko saw tears drip down the goddess' face.

As the goddess walked towards her old home she called back, "Go back you two. There's nothing for you here. Leave Suwako and I to grieve for our people."

"Besides this place isn't safe. The radiation has probably already affected you. Go see Eirin."

Renko's gut churned. She was a fool! Of course there would still be radiation. "Maribel! We have to go, now!"

Maribel seemed confused, but she immediately followed Renko's demand. Space tore open once again and the two stepped through.

The journey was rough. Renko's stomach lurched as they moved between spaces and she threw up into the void. Then they crashed into the bamboo forest in front of a large stately building. Two rabbits and a woman with silver hair were standing there in surprise, right as Maribel lost the contents of her stomach.

"What in the world…" the woman asked before seeming to make some connection. "Radiation? Quick come inside. You two, help them!"

The two rabbits moved to help Renko and Mary keep standing, and started leading them into the building. Renko was grateful for the assistance, because at that point the world started swimming…

Renko opened her eyes. Apparently she'd fallen asleep at some point. She sat up on the hospital bed and immediately moved to take Maribel's hand. Mary started at the touch, then cupped Renko's hands in her own. Her best friend looked like she was still in shock, but at least she'd stopped crying.

"You should be more careful with yourself."

Renko looked over to find Patchouli entering the room. "I'm sorry. I guess I just wasn't thinking. I should have known it wouldn't be safe yet." She closed her eyes briefly. "We're lucky radiation poisoning is easy to cure magically."

Patchouli sat down across from them. "I can understand how you'd forget something like that, given the situation." The magician sat their silently for a while. After a few false starts she said quietly, "I did something just as stupid myself when I lost my family in the Great War."

Renko started with surprise, and Maribel looked up. Patchouli coughed. "Well that's not what I came to talk about." She looked back to the two girls. "I did a scan based on your genetic data. I'm afraid I only found one of your cousins Maribel." Marbiel just looked down at the bed again. Patchouli took a deep breath. "Renko we found your parents, alive and mostly well. Apparently the village in Hokkaido that they were visiting escaped the war."

Renko sat there speechless. *My mother and father are alive? My mother and father are alive!* Her eyes began to tear up, then her

mask finally broke. "Thank you! Thank you! Oh thank god." She wiped at her tears as relief washed over her.

Her mood darkened as Maribel embraced her weakly. How unfair was it for Maribel to lose everything, while Renko had gotten a miracle?

It seemed Maribel had guessed her thoughts. "It's not your fault," Mary said. Renko gripped Mary tighter none the less. She needed the support.

Patchouli coughed again from behind her book. "Anyway Aya checked the village personally. She said they should be safe for the next couple of weeks. They have food and fuel to boil water, so they should be fine, along with the other 150 or so people who were there." She coughed lightly. "Apparently there are small villages and farmsteads like that scattered all around Japan and the nearby nations. Not much in the way of power though. And all the cities are gone."

She paused for a moment. "It shouldn't be hard to bring them down to Gensokyo. But right now might not be the best time."

"Why not?" Renko asked. She began to worry. Was the war still going on?

Patchouli shook her head. "We'll explain later. Don't worry. We should be safe in the short term, and you need the rest."

"But-" both Mary and Renko said in unison.

"Sorry, but this was the doctor's orders," Patchouli said, before rapidly chanting a sleep spell.

Renko fell back against the pillow and rapidly drifted off again into a dreamless sleep.

When Maribel awoke again she was in the same bed as Renko. She could almost pretend that the horrible night hadn't happened, but the ache in her heart and the makeshift hospital's walls prevented her from escaping reality.

They'd had a large, if generally uninteresting breakfast, when the woman who had met them at the door walked in, "Are you feeling better?"

"Physically," Maribel said.

"That's something at least," Ran said as she entered, followed by a woman with long black hair. "You two really worried Chen and I. We didn't have a clue where you were until Marisa told me."

"We weren't really thinking about that," Renko admitted.

"Fortunately you came back quickly. The radiation levels you were exposed to were probably fatal within 48 hours," the silver haired woman said. "Ah, by the way I'm Eirin Yagokoro, as you might have guessed."

The black haired woman bowed. "And I'm Kaguya Houraisan."

The devastation of the past day's events dulled most of the interest Maribel had in meeting the fairy tale princess. "Thank you for treating us."

"Don't worry about it," Eirin said. "After all, even as exiles I feel a duty to correct the wrongs committed by my fallen countrymen."

Renko choked at that. "You mean someone did this intentionally!" Maribel screamed. To think that someone, anyone could do this…

Eirin winced. "I'm afraid yes, this was due to lunar influence. We can't seem to get messages too and from the moon anymore, but it seems likely there was a coup d'etat."

Ran growled. "Chen found a deserter from the emissaries who survived. The rabbit said that there's a new lunar government dedicated to wiping out any possible annoyances on earth."

Maribel looked at the three women in front of her. "Who? Who murdered my family?"

She met Eirin's gaze. The woman stared into her eyes then nodded. "You'll be meeting them soon enough. After all, they'll be coming to remove the impurity of the youkai."

The words only fed the burning in Maribel's chest. "Impurity! How do those bastards have any right to talk about impurity!"

She felt Renko's hand on her shoulder but her anger wasn't abated.

Eirin shrugged. "Purity is a very vague concept. Gods are usually pure, youkai are always impure. Such is the way of things."

The thought that youkai like Byakuren and Keine were somehow less "pure" or less "righteous" then those who could ignore the deaths of millions burned her mind. She hated the thought. It wasn't right. It shouldn't be allowed!

Such is the way of things.

"Not. Any. More."

Her vision blurred and cracked. Before her she saw lines, no threads. Threads of words, of thoughts, each connected to thousands of others. One glowed with a bright painful light. A light that sickened her to her very core.

She reached out and ripped that thread to pieces. It hurt and stung, like she was ripping off a scab, but after the pain came a feeling of release. As the strands fell away she grabbed a few of those, then a few loose strands from elsewhere and she pulled together a new

thread. One that shown twice as bright, and left her feeling calm and secure.

She found herself back in the hospital.

Then pain ripped through her chest and she sank to her bed.

"Maribel!" Renko yelled as she pulled Mary upright. The pain started to be surrounded by numbness. She couldn't seem to answer.

Eirin just stood there in open mouthed shock. "What did you do?" asked Kaguya in wonder.

Ran on the other hand jumped into action. The kitsune stepped forward, aimed for a second and then punched her in the chest. The pain worsened, then faded away. "I told you not to be so careless with your powers Maribel! If reality wasn't so fragile you'd have just killed yourself instead of going into cardiac arrest! Dammit, you just escaped death by radiation poisoning! You need to learn to control yourself!"

"You idiot, Mary, take better care of yourself," Renko said hoarsely, wrapping her up in a hug.

"Sorry Renko…" she returned the embrace before looking up at the three visitors. "But I really can't remember what I did."

Eirin shook her head then laughed. "Oh those two really should have killed you when they met you. You're far too dangerous Ms Hearn." The laugh made it merely insulting instead of rage inducing, but Maribel's opinion of Eirin dropped a bit.

"Please explain, Eirin," the princess said. Her voice was friendly, but still somehow a command.

Eirin smiled and nodded in return. "She altered the definition of purity. Not really necessary, but I imagine there are a lot of…"

"Problems she's created," said an authoritative voice.

The entire room turned to look at the person who entered. It was a woman of fair height, with a elaborate crown/cap and a flat wooden rod. One that she was pointing straight at Maribel. "While I don't care about your issues with the Lunarians, the roles of the gods and Celestials are an important part of the bureaucracy. Your meddling can't be allowed to stand."

Maribel waited for one of the others to speak up, but Eirin and Kaguya were looking at the woman cautiously and Ran's tails were bristling. Renko just looked confused.

"Your mentor has stated you need to be more cautious with such power, but you have refused to listen. In addition to the sin created by your possession of that power, your willingness to use it in rage and anger are not proper. You must show more responsibility," the woman said.

"Who are you to judge me!" Maribel finally snapped.

Ran and Eirin turned to her in disbelief, while Kaguya started laughing uproariously.

"Shikieiki Yamaxandu, chief judge of hell," the woman replied.

Maribel's stomach abandoned ship. She really wished she could follow. "Oh," she managed to squeak out.

"Indeed," the woman said looking down at her. "Wrath can be a powerful sin. It consumes the mind and can prevent you from following the proper path. I suggest you learn to control it before it causes you to do something you will regret."

"Sorry," she managed to mutter.

Shikieiki nodded. "I'll want to speak to you more in depth later, but for now take this warning. And don't touch the underpinnings of reality again, do you understand?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Good."

The woman disappeared and Maribel fell back onto the bed. Renko and Ran gave her the 'I told you so' look, while Kaguya went back to laughing. Eirin just shook her head with a rueful grin. "Well that will perhaps confuse our foe." She stood a little straighter. "As for your original question…" Maribel and Renko both turned their full attention to the exiled Lunarian, "the people responsible are the world governments of earth. But this new Lunarian leadership must be the ones who pulled the strings." Eirin's eyes narrowed. "And the one who's in charge of them is Lord Tenshou. Which means they WILL be coming for you."

Shikieiki watched from beyond the veil of death as the women agreed to meet with the other representatives of Gensoukyo's houses and finish putting the pieces together. Komachi and her newest ferryman Toyohime stood behind her. Shikieiki had noticed a slight glimmer of recollection in the woman's eyes when Eirin walked in, but the new shinigami had easily set that aside.

"I didn't expect you to take it so easy on her," Komachi remarked. "She did quite a number on reality there. And making it so that the celestials and gods are always pure again took a lot of energy."

"Remember it's our duty to judge the dead Komachi," Shikieiki replied. "She will be judged properly and fairly at the end of her life, like everyone else. To tell the truth I would have normally had her change things back herself to fully remove the sin, but I could not let the world stand like that if she killed herself in the attempt. In fact I would not have acted directly at all if it weren't for the fact it intruded upon our work. The judgments of hell should not fall upon the living. An unfortunate necessity. Still, she can repent for her foolish actions later."

Toyohime coughed. "Um, excuse me your honor, but if we aren't supposed to interfere with the living beyond speeches why did you leave her other alterations in? Her tweaks won't affect many Lunarians, but won't some youkai being pure affect the coming battle?"

Shikieiki shrugged. "True it will. But then to change those back would also be to interfere with the living. Sometimes inaction and action alike will change the course of history. At those points one should choose the path that allows the living the most choice." She smiled slightly. "Besides, I admit I approve of those changes personally."

"That's all kinda confusing," Komachi said with a yawn.

"Hm… all you need to take away from that is don't get involved in the fighting Komachi." Shikieiki said. "Now you two should get to work. There's a lot of souls to ferry."

As the two shinigami faded away Shikieiki nodded. And there would be more souls to come. Ones that she was looking forward to judging…

Authors notes: Well… Yeah.

This was hard for me to write correctly, and I can only hope I got close to the right feelings off of it.

It should also clarify a little more on the state of the outside world now. And what it means to those who lived there.

And now the lines will start getting drawn…

Chapter 9

I fear all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve.

It was obvious Eientei had taken out the walls of two rooms to get the space to seat everyone here properly. Eirin was sitting at the head along Kaguya, who was currently exchanging dark glares with Mokou across the table.

Behind Eirin were three Rabbits. Renko knew Reisen and Tewi, but there was a third rabbit as well, who was heavily bandaged, and looked almost as traumatized as Maribel had last night.

Ran and Chen were also at the table along with a fourth rabbit who was staring at the floor with all her might. Ran moved some cushions out to give them seats. Maribel took the one next to Ran while Renko sat next to her. To Renko's right were Flandre, and Alice, with Juri and Marisa sitting behind them. Marisa was obviously preoccupied, and Alice's expression was dark.

Keine of course, was here with Mokou, and Hitomi was sitting next to them. There was another open empty space on that side of the table, but as Renko and Mary sat down Eirin clapped her hands lightly. "I've received word that Byakuren and her followers are too busy attempting to grant aid to those villages and individuals who survived the war outside to attend. However Shou said that she offers the blessings of Bishamonten to us."

Flandre shrugged. "That's not the important part. The important part is whether or not those stupid moon people are responsible for this."

Eirin nodded. "We've confirmed it beyond a shadow of a doubt. It seemed likely because Reisen, er the younger Reisen, and Hitomi said the assassin who killed the Watatsuki sisters was Jiyuwan. Then Chen found a deserter who survived the incident who

confirmed that the traitors that ousted Lord Tsukiyomi are responsible." She inclined her head at the rabbit next to Chen.

The rabbit sat there for a few moments before Chen said something in her ear. "Y~yes. After Lord Tsukiyomi left Lord Tenshou told us to exterminate the humans. He said was going to destroy Gensoukyo after that."

Keine frowned. "Any chance he'll change his mind?"

"No." Kaguya shrugged. "Lord Tenshou was arrogant even from a Lunarian's standards. And he's better at holding a grudge then Mokou."

The immortal made a rude gesture across the table. "Die in a fire, princess."

"Not this week Mokou dear. Maybe next," the princess said sweetly. Her expression turned serious again as she continued, "Anyway, as I said he bears a grudge because during the lunar invasion an invading youkai killed his father. In any case if he gets it into his head that he's going to do something it would take quite a bit to stop him."

Eirin raise her hand. "Forgive me princess, but there's one thing that might be able to stop him. Politically anyway." She looked across the table. "Apparently Precia here," she indicated the cowering rabbit girl next to Chen, "overheard something interesting. The Lunarians found out Yukari was behind the youkai invasion of the moon."

"Normally that wouldn't matter, since Yukari is dead, but like any demagogue he's managed to find a way around that little problem. His justifications all hinge on getting revenge against Yukari, and thus, he's mobilized the moon against her successor."

All eyes turned to Maribel.

Eirin continued, "Thus if Maribel here turned herself in to the moon they'd lose their excuse for war and be forced to drop the matter for

a couple of centuries."

Maribel took a deep breath. She hadn't even considered that.

"Like hell!" Marisa said. "They're the ones at fault!"

"Any self respecting youkai would die before paying tribute to those scum," Ran spat.

Mokou raised an eyebrow. "Your call kid, but don't worry about hurting our feelings here. I'm not looking forward to a fight, but I like you more then I want peace with them."

Finally Renko squeezed her hand and said, "You aren't going anywhere without me, Mary."

Strangely the angry declarations helped calm Maribel. She turned back towards Eirin. "They murdered my family because some human, somewhere, was in their way. I'm not going to sacrifice my life to salve their ego further."

"Good," Kaguya said. "You'll need that resolve. I don't want that bastard to achieve any of his goals."

Eirin looked shocked. "Princess…"

Kaguya returned her servant's look. "What, Eirin? I'm almost as angry as the rest of Earth at how much those traitors messed things up, and I know you're furious at them for murdering the poor Watatsukis. We're part of Gensoukyo now, regardless of our differences."

Eirin blinked at Kaguya for a few seconds, then smiled darkly. "I suppose that's true." She turned back to the table. "Then let me give you all our information."

"Please," Alice said. "Information will be the most important part of this war."

"Indeed. Then let's begin with troop strength." Eirin looked around the room. "The average Lunarian is about as strong as the average Oni, though of course we all know how meaningless 'power levels' become at that stage. Still this will be a battle between the strongest and most skilled. Numbers won't be as important as a few strong warriors."

"In addition there are those people beyond the 'average.' For example Jiyuwan has already shown his swordsmanship to be the equal of a god's. On the other hand many of the younger Lunarians have no battle experience, and might be killed by a cunning trick from someone like Rumia."

"Rumia doesn't exactly do cunning," Chen stated.

Eirin shrugged, "True, but you get the idea."

Marisa sighed in relief. "So then most of them aren't as skilled as those sisters right?"

"I'm afraid I won't know until the invasion happens. But it is unlikely." Eirin frowned. "Still while we know they only have about 200 citizens left, I can't say whether the strong or the weak left. Only their numbers." She rested her hands on the table. "So what about our numbers?"

There was a rustling around the table as the various people looked about. Maribel looked about herself. She had no idea about the number of youkai around.

Ran was the first to speak. "Well you can count on the fairies to play around when the war starts for a little while, but they're only going to be distractions. As for actual numbers…" Ran frowned. "It's not like we can just get together a youkai army again. I think Yukari had Suika help the last time, and that turned into a complete disaster. It won't happen again."

"Hm… What about that little oni?" Flandre asked. "Will she show up?"

There was a sudden swirling of mist and the oni dropped out onto the table. "Yep! I'll be fighting for sure." She frowned, "But the other oni don't seem interested. I tried to talk Yuugi into it, but she was a no go." The oni shrugged, then vanished again.

There was a brief silence after the Oni's departure then Keine shook her head. "I'm afraid I can't help. I'm going to be protecting the village, and while they're likely to attack on a full moon, my powers can only do so much at once."

"And I'll be making sure no one gets to Keine," Mokou said. "Not that I won't burn anyone that crosses my path, but I'm not going to be actively hunting unless something goes wrong."

"I have to take care of my daughter," Hitomi said curtly. "I'm not going to leave her alone in a warzone."

Maribel had to admit she was glad to hear that. Marisa and Alice seemed to be relieved as well.

"So do we actually have an army?" Juri asked. "I am certain Eientei's rabbits will help, but the moon has their own rabbit army. And none of the rest of us can bring in troops capable of making a difference."

Eirin nodded. "As Ran's pointed out we can't just tell everyone to join forces. Really there are only three groups of youkai who can help." She ticked off the groups one by one. "The kappa, who won't fight alone. The oni, who aren't coming, and the tengu."

She turned to Ran. "What are our chances of getting the tengu to join us?"

"I don't know. The Great Tengu and I haven't spoken often. I can only hope Aya has enough pull as a senior tengu to help my argument."

Ran sighed. "I'll get on that right away and inform everyone of their response."

"So we need the tengu." Flandre shrugged. "Or we could just fight them piece meal. They can't win."

"Don't get overconfident," Reisen said quietly. "You're very strong Flandre. But most youkai can't compare with you. And you have a number of weaknesses that come from being a vampire. Most importantly those Lunarians born on the moon tend to have powers that seal or disrupt other people's powers. People with attack powers like my former masters and myself are in the minority, though some have even more esoteric powers as well. There's a good chance someone can either attack your weaknesses or negate your strengths."

Eirin and Kaguya both nodded. "Well said Udongein. In addition there's another problem there." Eirin frowned. "Lord Tenshou's power."

"What's that?" Maribel asked. She wanted to know what the man she planed to kill could bring against her.

The thought seemed strange. She had never thought about using her power to kill before.

Things had changed though.

"He has the ability to know exactly where people need to be in order to maximize the success of a plan." Eirin replied grimly. "Sadly that power gives him a great advantage against small groups of dispersed enemies. Fortunately he's terrible at it. He'll always ask for something too general and get a plan that only works to the letter of the request. Which is a damn good thing, because if he's ever direct he usually succeeds."

"Hm… Sounds a little like my sister's power. Which means if he doesn't have enough forces, he'll still be split too thin. And we

already have a plan that'll confuse him," Flandre said with a sadistic grin. The three magicians nodded in agreement.

Eirin shook her head. "I hope it's good. Is there anything else I should mention?"

"Weapon wise I know they'll have guns and shields to make them the equal of youkai. What about things like that damned purifying fan?" Ran asked. "I don't much look forward to being instantly purified at the atomic level."

Eirin laughed. "Ah that? That shouldn't be an issue. Even if they didn't all function differently now, my fail safe will keep them out of enemy hands. You see when I originally designed them we hadn't left for the moon yet, and I didn't want someone to grab that and start purifying all his enemies. So it only works for a pure wielder." Her smile grew wider. "I imagine Lord Tenshou is swearing about that right now…"

Lord Tenshou swore at how poorly things had turned out. As the noble began to fiddle with his go board Jiyuwan began to guess what had gone wrong.

"Are you certain?" his lord asked the man.

Shimeri nodded. "None of the mass purification weapons work. At all. In fact many of the purity based defenses seem to have gone offline as well. Our more conventional weapons and magic still work of course, but nothing beyond that."

Lord Tenshou swore again. And well he should. Their weapons didn't work, they had less people then they should. And Jiyuwan would bet money that all his lord's plans had been built around destroying Gensoukyo.

A place that, due to the barrier's collapse, no longer officially existed.

Truth be told, Jiyuwan had seen this coming for some time. However his lord wasn't listening to his advice much these days. But still Jiyuwan had to admit that he'd focused more on trying to stop his lord's bad ideas rather then fixing them. A flaw of his.

Shimeri cleared his throat. "My lord. Why are you so worried? Surely our normal weapons will suffice."

Jiyuwan could see his lord repressing the desire to call his ally a fool in public, so he spoke up. "While we are stronger then any normal youkai, they have more experience in battle. Also we are outnumbered approximately 20 to 1. Purification weapons would have allowed even the weakest of us to sweep legions of powerful youkai away. Now we must rely on their unwillingness to band together to find victory. If, say, the oni and tengu were to unite as an army to oppose us, we would likely fail. We likely will have to mount several assaults to claim victory now."

Lord Tenshou finally relaxed a little. "Fortunately a unified youkai front will not happen," Tenshou said. He sighed and began rearranging the board. "Jiyuwan, what's our combat strength?"

"All the Lunarians who desired to leave have left. We currently have 70 non combatants, though some of those are old enough to bear arms, 151 people who seek to fight, and one unknown," the warrior said. He continued because he knew his lord would ask, "The unknown is Sareseno Watatsuki."

Lord Tenshou raised an eyebrow at that. "I see." His lord thought for a moment then said, "You should speak to him in the autumn gardens after this meeting. That would be the best."

Jiyuwan nodded. His lord had not indicated he was supposed to kill the man, so his blade would not be further tainted. He allowed himself to feel relief for that.

Lord Tenshou thought a few more moments then said, "It seems to me that we might be able to remove two of our foes from the fight

before entering the field. Both the Scarlet Devil Mansion and the Temple of Myouren were 'out of play' during the Lunar Invasion right?"

Shimeri nodded. "Yes, they were."

Tenshou nodded and began filling the Go board. "Then we can afford to be magnanimous. Find two rabbits to carry messages to those houses. Pick ones who are supposed to be punished but who you're certain won't run away."

"It shall be done Lord," Shimeri said before exiting.

His Lord turned to him. "I'll be returning to my estate to reevaluate my plans. Jiyuwan, speak with the Watatsuki, then get a full accounting of those who are going to war with us."

He bowed. "Yes Lord."

Then he left, to speak to the husband of the woman he murdered. It was unfortunate that nothing he said to the man would affect the battle.

Sareseno stood in the autumn gardens. The trees here had been bred specifically to have all the colors of autumn without the leaves actually dying. In the past he'd found it beautiful and had spent many hours under the branches.

Now he was here because the display was one of the few things that seemed more hollow then he did.

His mind drifted back to when he made his decision.

" *Brother… do you really plan to stay here?"*

Sareseno looked over at his brother, wondering what he planned to do. Plans seemed beyond him really.

" I don't know." Sareseno looked over the gardens again. "How can I trust myself to make a choice? I didn't even realize I was in love with the woman I was married to until she died. What kind of fool does that make me?"

Miyari frowned. "You're definitely a fool Sareseno, but it's not because you find yourself in love. It's because you're letting your survivor's guilt get in the way of rational thought."

" Hm… rational thought." Sareseno looked at the leaves. "Tell me Miyari, do you find this place beautiful?"

His brother looked at him questioningly. "I'm not the one to ask about such matters, but I do think it's pretty."

" I see." Sareseno closed his eyes. "I find it something of a farce myself. I can't see the beauty any more."

" What are you talking about Sareseno?" He felt Miyari's hand fall on his shoulder. "You've written poems about this place's beauty."

" I was a fool." He opened his eyes, and plucked one of the leaves from it's tree. "Do you know why the leaves changing color is beautiful? It's the color of course, but the essence of the beauty is the death of the leaves, the passing of that color." He waved his hand at the forest that was eternally autumn. "There's none of that here. Just colors. No different from painted leaves."

" There's beauty even in paintings brother."

Sareseno turned away. "I know. But I'm tired of only seeing that reflected beauty. I want to see the real beauty. The beauty of struggle, impurity and death."

" There's no place for me among the true Lunarians anymore. Goodbye Miyari, and live well. I promise to do the same. But in my own way."

He snorted as his words. He was always good at waxing poetic. But he was hardly living up to them was he?

He was learning of pain. Of sorrow. Of hopelessness. But he couldn't find any meaning there. Or perhaps that was what he was supposed to learn? Still it didn't bring him any closer to an answer. Or even a question.

"Forgive my intrusion."

Sareseno slowly turned in surprise. "Are you here to kill me too? I thought that would be too blatant."

Jiyuwan bowed. "No. I was not ordered to take your life, so you will not come to harm. Even if you choose to take revenge."

Sareseno gaped at the man. He'd wondered what he would do if he faced his wife's murderer, but all his thoughts had involved the man denying the action, or confronting him violently. Not, this…

Finally he asked, "Why?"

"It was my lord's orders," Jiyuwan replied simply. "I swore long ago to serve regardless of my personal feelings." The swordsman paused a moment.

"I'm uncertain if you will draw any comfort from it, but your wife not only avoided my ambush, but wounded me severely. Because I had to rush healing I've permanently lost 3% of my arms strength. Or so the doctors say."

Sareseno wondered if he was supposed to feel rage or pride at that. However he still just felt empty.

"Tell me about death swordsman."

The man shrugged. "Death is nothing. Duty is everything."

Sareseno rubbed his eyes. "Don't lie to me swordsman. I know you would not be so flippant if we were speaking of your son's death."

The mans eyes widened slightly, then he bowed. "Indeed. Perhaps that is another failing of mine… or perhaps that is my one virtue." Sareseno saw the man's eyes turn to the painted leaves.

"I can not tell you about death poet. But I can tell you, life is defined by death."

There was a silence.

Jiyuwan turned to bow to Sareseno. "I fear I have no words for you, Lord Watatsuki. But perhaps I can give you something else. I know the power you possess. The power to see, and to remember the sagas of those who give you leave." He stood up straight. "I give you permission to tell my story, in its entirety, as you see fit. I give you my legacy. Destroy my name, or leave me to be forgotten. It is your right now."

Sareseno felt a rush, as knowledge seeped into his mind. He knew if he closed his eyes and concentrated all the years of history the man before him embodied would flow into his mind. For that matter he could watch history unfold around the man if he wanted to.

A thought came to his mind. He raised a hand to stop the swordsman from leaving. "I ask one more thing of you. Please ask Lord Tenshou to allow me to record the war."

Jiyuwan looked mildly surprised but nodded. "I will ask."

The swordsman left, but Sareseno didn't care. He'd found a purpose. A temporary purpose perhaps, but perhaps in action he would find understanding.

He left the autumn garden for his home. The path seemed to fly by, and soon he found himself at his table, brush, ink and paper ready.

He closed his eyes and called upon the story Jiyuwan had given him.

As the images swam through his head, he began to write.

The swordsman waited. He knew that the two generals of the moon were formidable foes. His only hope of victory was in surprise…

Authors Notes:

And the battle lines are drawn.

As for those who asked about Yukari's plans? Well feel free to worry, they're proceeding smoothly. As certain as the North Star.

Chapter 10

" *People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.* "

Eirin weighed her options as the meeting broke up. She had no faith in the tengu. To be honest she didn't really have much faith in herself. She fully expected the tengu to look after their own interests first, just as she was doing now.

First she had to define what that meant though. What were her goals, and how could she accomplish them?

First was to keep the princess safe. Kaguya was immortal, but Eirin knew several ways to make an immortal's life unbearable. She'd designed most of them in fact. It was folly to hand out the Hourai elixer without a backup plan to stop an angry immortal human. So letting them capture the princess was unacceptable.

Secondly was her own life. She liked living.

Third was Reisen, Tewi and the other rabbits of Eientei. Reisen of course deserved a number all to herself, but the moon rabbit had changed. She was unlikely to abandon her comrades again.

Tewi of course could look after herself. And would.

Last came the rest of Gensoukyo. She had a fondness for the place after all.

Unfortunately matters weren't as simple as saving one or the another. Hiding would protect Kaguya, herself and the rabbits at the expense of Gensoukyo. But the Lunarians would surely return later, and without the rest of Gensoukyo to aid Eientei, they'd be doomed.

Fortunately she had a guess as to her opponent's plans. He'd be doing the exact same thing she was doing, but he wouldn't be

putting the pieces together and figuring out how to attack the whole. Lord Tenma would just guess at her weak point and target it.

The only difficulty was guessing how he'd get it wrong. There's only one right answer, but there are an infinite number of wrong ones.

Eirin had always worried about her ability to be cold blooded. It was not a positive trait morally. But it was incredibly useful. And right now it allowed her to guess her opponent's plans, and to triage things appropriately.

Even if that cut might mean her own death.

She stood up and walked to where Reisen was working on organizing the earth rabbits into patrols. They'd started listening to her when they realized their skins were on the line. The fact that Tewi had been the soul of obedience had probably scared them into following orders as well. Princess Kaguya was of course watching the whole affair, trying to keep her spirits up.

"Udongein, could you spare a moment?" Eirin asked.

"Ah yes master! What do you need?" Reisen replied.

Eirin smiled at her student. "I want you to take over the distribution of the army. In full. You'll be in charge of the Princess' defense."

"What!" Everyone in the room was staring at her now.

Kaguya stood, "What are you doing, Eirin?"

Eirin steeled herself for the fight ahead. "I trust Reisen to lead the rabbits in war. She can hold back the Lunarian's moon rabbit armies easily, and if they bring in more people she can organize a fighting retreat with Tewi's help."

Kaguya shook her head. "I know I can trust Reisen." Reisen perked up immediately at that. "But I can't trust you Eirin. You'll do a lot of stupid stuff just to keep me out of a fight." Kaguya's expression

softened and Eirin felt some of her willpower weakening as the princess moved close to her. "I'm truly immortal Eirin. And I'm skilled in combat now. Mokou's seen to that. I don't need to be hidden away."

Eirin sighed. "I understand princess. It's just I don't want to see you hurt." Then she smiled. "But I'm afraid I have a good reason for this." She turned to Reisen. "Udongein, if you were Lord Tenshou how would you use your power to plan your assault on Eientei?"

Reisen thought for a moment. "I'd either ask how to position people to keep Eientei from disturbing the battle, knowing I could finish them off later, or I'd ask for a plan to eliminate you master." She thought another moment. "He wouldn't know that Princess Kaguya and I are both as dangerous as we now are, and he wouldn't know about Tewi at all."

Eirin nodded. "So you see, if we want to avoid his plans we have to make it so both his most likely options are flawed. Either he ignores Eientei and gives you a chance to attack him, or he tries to contain Eientei and allows me to take him by surprise."

Kaguya gazed deeply at Eirin's face, then embraced her tightly. Eirin's gut twisted as she felt Kaguya's tears start falling. "Eirin you idiot."

Eirin folded the princess in her own arms. "Kaguya… I don't want to leave you all here. But this is the best plan… Please believe in me. I'll make it back, I promise."

Kaguya's grip just tightened. "I hate it when you lie to me."

Eirin closed her eyes. "I promise I'll do everything I can. I'll use every trick I know. If that's not enough… then staying here won't change anything."

Eirin felt Reisen embrace her from behind, and her heart twisted again. "Master. Be safe."

"You two take care of yourselves," Eirin said. "I want to have a home… a family to return to."

He had born many names over the years. Lord Tenma, the Tengu God, the Great Tengu. Currently Great Tengu was the most popular, though the other tengu elders knew he was more a living legend then a pure youkai at this point.

He had led his people to safety when the human world turned against them, and he had kept them strong and safe in their mountain abode. They'd weathered the various storms of history largely untouched, continuing their millenia long way of life. Some things had changed. The old gossip mills being replaced by newspapers, and the faces of those around him. But the tengu were strong. Like the crows of the outside world they survived.

Thus he had already been thinking about how to turn the most recent situation to his people's advantage before the former guardians of the land came to him. He knew what his answer must be.

Still it couldn't hurt to hear their case. He was not such a fool as to ignore information when it made itself available.

There was a clap outside the shoji door, and his personal guard Momiji called in, "Great Tengu, forgive the intrusion but Aya Shameimaru is here with emissaries. Ran Yakumo, Chen Yakumo, Renko Usami and Maribel Hearn."

The Great Tengu was mildly surprised at that. He'd figured Ran would have used Maribel as a front. Perhaps Aya had cautioned them? Or perhaps there were other factors in play.

"I have been expecting them. Please bring them in."

Momiji opened the door and led the five supplicants into the room, then moved to his side to stand guard. A formality, but one earned by the wolf tengu.

Aya sat in front of the group, but slightly to the side, indicating she was here simply because she thought her lord should hear the other supplicant's words. To the Great Tengu's surprise both the humans sat alongside Ran, with her Shikigami behind the shoulders of both Ran and the woman that, if the pictures were to be believed, was Maribel. They each bowed before sitting. Not as deeply as perhaps they should, but he didn't really care, and making a fuss about protocol wouldn't benefit him right now. No, given the serious looks and smoldering rage in Maribel's eyes, pleasant conversation would be best.

"Thank you for bringing me these illustrious guests, Aya." The Great Tengu put on his best smile. "I apologize for not speaking to you personally when you started your tours of Gensoukyo, Maribel, Renko. I thought I would have more time to learn about you." He paused and allowed a concerned frown to show. "However, it seems events have conspired to force me to reconsider that." He looked out the window over the new lands that had been revealed. "I assume you came to speak to me about the barrier's collapse?"

Ran spoke first. "No. We came because Gensoukyo is about to be invaded."

Straight to the point. They were concerned then. "I see. It's the Lunarians I suppose?"

Maribel opened her mouth, frowned and kept her silence. Still the Great Tengu noticed. Apparently she was taking this war personally. Then again perhaps she had a reason to. Her friend, Renko spoke instead. "Yes. A faction of them apparently."

"I've heard rumors," the Great Tengu said, leaving silent that the 'rumors' had come from Aya herself. "Still why do you think the Tengu would be involved in this war?"

"They're willing to kill an entire planet full of humans because they annoyed them. What do you think they'll do to someone they find dangerous?" Maribel snapped.

The Great Tengu nodded at the point. "Hm… True. Still groups are more likely to strike out at the weak then the strong. Momiji, your opinion?"

Momiji maintained her watch over the room while stating, "They're almost certainly right. The Lunarians have never known defeat. And they know we can mitigate any gains they make. If they wish to humble the youkai they must defeat us."

He nodded. Nothing he hadn't already thought of, but it was good to have it confirmed by another who he trusted. "Then it seems that we will be part of the war whether we choose to fight or not." Now came the hard part. "I thank you for your warning."

"Then you'll gather your army and join with us?" Chen asked happily.

He sighed. He didn't want to dash that hope but he had to. "No. The armies of the tengu will gather, but we will not march."

"Why not!" Maribel yelled. "You said yourself they'd be coming for you. Why do you think sitting in one place is going to help you win?"

The Great Tengu's smiled thinly. "Do you know what the tengu nation's biggest weakness is?" he asked.

"You're arrogant?" suggested Renko. Somehow she managed to take all the bite out of the insult though. In fact the Great Tengu almost thought he saw Momiji's lips twitch.

"Hm, no. Our confidence can trip up individual tengu. But as a group? Well…" He turned to Aya. "Who's my successor Aya?"

Aya blinked and stared at him. "You don't have a successor."

"Exactly." He sighed and turned to Ran. "The tengu don't base inheritance off bloodline, they base it off worthiness. Far superior to the human model," He chuckled wryly. "However, some unique

circumstances has led to my current problem. Aya, which living Tengu has seen the greatest number of battles?"

Aya looked confused. "Momiji has seen 17 battles. Amuro has seen 13. Only Momiji has fought in a war past the creation of the barrier, and then only as a partial combatant."

The Great Tengu smiled. "Now now Aya. I know you've fought in 21 battles. Admittedly you claimed to be reporting, but I know your desire to meddle is greater then your reporter integrity." The four visitors all looked at Aya with varying levels of surprise at that. "In addition I know both you and that Hatate girl defeated an Oni in danmaku. An impressive feat, even if it was a game."

"Still you two both lack the political capitol needed to rule." Which was the nice way of saying Aya was almost considered an outsider despite her elder status, and Hatate was barely into full adulthood. "And I find that those who have the connections to rule have equally well connected enemies who have equally dull resumes."

"That's the long and short of it. No living tengu other then myself has had the *opportunity* to show the skills required for leadership." He looked out the window again. "Especially not in a time of exploration and growth like this era will come to be. I could make a good guess as to who would be suitable, but the other tengu wouldn't just follow them."

He turned grimly to Ran. "In short if the Lunarians kill me there will no longer be an army of tengu. Just several squabbling clans who will most likely retreat to their homes to protect their own families."

"Are you saying you don't trust your people to not abandon their posts in the middle of a war?" Maribel asked.

"Not if 'their post' needs to be constantly coordinated with headquarters," the Great Tengu said sternly. "This isn't a human war, with two armies meeting on the field of battle. This will be a series of skirmishes. Youkai and Lunarians hunting each other through

Gensoukyo, each hoping to find someone weaker then themselves. If the armies know that there's someone guarding their families while they hunt then everything will be fine. But without a leader…" He shrugged.

"I don't get it," Chen said. "How does sitting around doing nothing help?"

The Great Tengu turned to the Shikigami. "Because with my armies concentrated they can't eliminate me easily. I can lure them into traps as they try."

Ran looked like she'd swallowed something bitter. "That might work against a normal foe, though I pity those of us stuck outside while you slowly trap Lunarians. But we have good information that the leader of the enemy army has the ability to know how to disperse his forces perfectly. 'To know where people need to be to maximize success.' A trap won't work against him unless you cause them to think irrationally."

The Great Tengu turned around to conceal his reaction. THAT he had not heard. His mind spun rapidly as he considered what that meant for his plans.

He did not like the answer he received.

Without turning he replied. "That news makes the trap my only option. Out leading the troops I would be too far from reinforcements. Here I can avoid being ambushed by a great number of troops."

There was a shuffling behind him, then Renko's voice. "That doesn't seem quite right. Wouldn't you do better with more variables in play? Sitting here away from the chaos of war makes you an easy mark."

"And there's not much stopping the Lunarians from just wiping out everyone else and getting to you later after a rest," snapped Maribel.

The truth of the words stung the Great Tengu. But his path remained the same. Or at least similar. He managed to hide his emotions and turned back to his guests. "I'm afraid my path is set. We will form our armies here, and attempt to lure as many Lunarians in as possible. I'm sorry if that harms your personal plans."

"You id~," Maribel's outburst was cut off by Ran putting a hand on her shoulder. The fox looked at him with narrowed eyes, then nodded.

"We're sorry for wasting your time then."

The Great Tengu bowed. "You did not waste it. I apologize we couldn't come to a closer agreement."

The five rose to leave, but he raised his hand. "I will say this though. Any Tengu who wishes to fight in the rest of Gensoukyo has my permission to do so. If you want to battle at your friends' side Aya you have full leave, as does any one who joins you."

"Thank you Great Tengu," Aya said before exiting with the others.

He sighed and sat down again as the door shut behind the crew. He sat in silence for some time, occasionally looking out the window, wondering if his calculations were correct.

After a few minutes he noticed Momiji was silently watching him.

"You do not approve," he said.

"No. I do not understand the choice," Momiji replied.

The Great Tengu liked Momiji. She was admittedly a little young, but she was the most faithful and skilled wolf tengu on the mountain. The reason for that annoyed him admittedly.

Wolf tengu, unlike their crow tengu cousins, didn't do well in small spaces. There were always less wolf tengu then crow tengu. This had been fine in the days of yore when the tengu lived all along the

islands of Japan. But as their territory shrunk to the lands of Gensoukyo it had become a serious problem. Their numbers were tiny. Perhaps 28 families.

The wolf tengu of course had instituted a series of arranged marriages to make sure their species survived. Bloodlines were traced and the pairings were designed to keep them healthy. There were hiccups here and there but it worked out well. For most people.

The problem was that there were always more girls then boys. One of those quirks of nature. Boys just had a slightly higher fatality rate during childhood. Which meant there were always four or five women who were never going to have a suitable partner of similar age.

As time passed those fighters tended to either set off as lone wolves, or turn completely to their duties. Those that stayed with the rest of the tengu had become something of an elite fighting force, willing to give their lives to protect their fellow pack mates. In many cases perhaps overeager to do so.

Momiji was one of those women. The eldest now in fact, which was why she was guarding the Great Tengu personally. He approved greatly of the woman. She was as fanatically loyal as her predecessors, but considered death to be a sign of a failed strategy. And she was willing both to state her opinion and admit that she might be wrong. These were all excellent qualities in his mind.

Which is why he gave in to that stare and admitted what he could not to the outsiders. Not even to loyal tengu like Aya.

"There is more to the matter. If I die without a clear successor, invasion or no, then the tengu will scatter to the winds." He pointed at the sky of the outside world, no longer behind a barrier. "Most of my political power comes from the fact that there was nowhere else to go. I imagine several young tengu, and perhaps a few older ones, are starting to realize they can pack up and take their family out into

the world to a place where they don't have to listen to the Great Tengu's boring speeches and annoying edicts."

He moved to where his writing table was. "In fact we'll lose some families anyway, just because we tengu are curious. And that is a good and just thing. But if I die, and there's a leadership gap… well then everyone will think of leaving. After all why fight the Lunarians to defend those other youkai? The ones that pester us almost as much as the humans?"

"I see," Momiji said slowly.

He nodded to his guard then picked out a brush and a piece of paper. It was time for a final decision.

The words came to him easily.

The leaves turn once again

Bare branches fall to the floor

New life arises

He nodded. Poor, but sincere.

"Call in Aya, I have a proclamation to make."

Aya shook her head as they left. "I'm sorry. Something must be up that I don't know about. I've been running around the rest of Gensoukyo too much. I'll see if I can find people to help but…" Her shrug indicated what she thought of her chances.

"Not your fault, Aya," Ran replied. Her bitter expression hadn't vanished however. "Still that's a serious blow to our plans. We'll have to try to spread their forces thin and confuse them now."

Renko sighed. "Didn't we just say that wasn't going to work?"

"As Flandre pointed out, knowing how to split your forces doesn't matter if you don't have enough forces to split," Ran said. "We have to try to make them overextend."

"Isn't there anyone else?" Maribel asked. She seemed to be slipping back towards her depression. Not too surprising considering how anger and determination were probably the only things keeping her up Aya thought.

Chen shook her head. "Not any armies."

"But there are a few more people we can ask for help," Ran said. "And we'll want to confer with our known allies as well. I think we should split up now though. I should go with Maribel to see Chireiden and the Netherworld. Chen and Renko should check in with the SDM and see about some of the stronger youkai out there."

Chen's tailed lashed a bit. "Aw… I was hoping to try to make that rabbit into my shikigami."

Ran rolled her eyes, "She's better off at Eientei. Rabbits need groups. And you should get to know someone a little better before making them a shikigami, Chen."

Renko frowned. "Why that split?"

"Because you'll need a guide, and I need to stick close to Maribel so she doesn't break the laws of reality again," Ran said with a mild glare.

Maribel brightened a little at that. "Well it turned out for the best, right?"

Renko pushed her friend's nose. "That doesn't mean you should ever try something like it again. You could have died!"

Maribel winced at her friend's vehemence. "Sorry Renko. I promise to be more careful," Maribel replied.

"We'll meet at the temple of Myouren," Ran said.

"Why not the Hakurei shrine?" Maribel asked.

Ran smoothed her tails, "Because I want to see if they're willing to fight," she sighed. "And because I want the Lunarians to forget that the Hakurei shrine exists."

"We can only hope," said Renko.

Author's Notes:

My views on the wolf tengu are based purely on wild guesses.

My guesses as to Aya however have a better foundation I feel. Aya seems to be out and about in Gensoukyo by herself a lot, something that seems odd for a tengu as old as she is. You'd think she'd be back at home with the other tengu more at her age. Perhaps starting a family.

Chapter 11

" *He who speaks without modesty will find it difficult to make his words good."*

Alice's dolls fluttered about the massive dining hall where her family had gathered, arranging things here and there. Normal people would have fidgeted, but to Alice making the dolls pace nervously in her stead was as natural to her as breathing.

Finally Patchouli and Koakuma sat up. "There. Could you check the work Alice?"

Dinah also stood from where she was reading, and came to look over at the spell. Most of it was fiendishly complicated on a conceptual level, like a lot of Patchouli's spells, but Alice had gotten used to the style over the years, so she knew where to look for the runes that needed to be part of the spell. After a few checks she nodded. "You've got the symbols perfect. I'm not sure exactly how the mansion transfer works, but since that's a duplicate of a spell that pushed through the Hakurei barrier the jump should work just fine."

"I don't know why you're talking about running away," Flandre said sharply from the head of the table. "They aren't going to leave the basement alive."

Juri frowned at the vampire. "My Lady, what if one of the intruders has the ability to summon rain, or sunlight? It would be best to be prepared so you aren't hurt."

Flandre sighed and put her head on the table. "Hmph. Like I'd lose to some stupid failed humans…"

"Ah excuse me, Lady Flandre?" Everyone turned to see Huian enter the room and bow. "We have an emissary here to see us."

Alice raised an eyebrow. "An emissary?"

Huian motioned behind her and a shaking rabbit stepped forward. "I ah! I, um. Iwassenthere to bring you an offer of pardon from the moon," she finally squeaked out.

There was a brief silence as everyone stared at the rabbit.

Then Flandre snickered. "Pardon? For what, scaring them?"

The rabbit gaped, "Um, I don't, that is to say… here's the letter!" She held forth a sealed note with trembling hands.

Marisa cast a quick spell to check for traps. "Looks clean."

"Well, I never expected that spell to actually have a good use," Patchouli said.

"Hey, I don't see you complaining now that books are being added instead of removed," Marisa replied.

Alice sent one of her dolls to grab and open it. "Check it again. Best not to take chances." Marisa shrugged and complied, then Alice moved to where Flandre was sitting with the doll trailing behind.

Flandre grabbed the note, leaving Alice and Juri to read over her shoulders. "Let's see… 'Not guilty of crimes against the moon.' Hah! Isn't existence a crime according to those jerks? 'Tolerate your continued presence.' Like they've got a choice. 'Offer of safe passage to other locales.' Tch." She turned her gaze to the rabbit who jumped backwards. "So basically the head jerk of the moon says we can run away and he won't chase us?"

The rabbit just stood there and shivered. She was looking around for escape routes and wasn't finding any. Flandre tended to worry people, Alice mused. However, it seemed this girl arrived scared. That could be useful. She still didn't like using fear as a negotiating

tool. It was uncouth. But then so was blowing up the Earth because you thought the humans were lowering your property values.

"Talk little rabbit!" Flandre said, her movements setting her wings tinkling.

The rabbit tried to jump back, only to be caught by Huian. It struggled briefly for a moment, but there was no escape from the youkai's grasp. After a bit of futile struggling the moon rabbit broke down and started crying. "Uuuah! Ple~, please don't kill me! I taste bad. I don't like the new people in charge! I~ I didn't do anything! They sent me here to die, just because my father didn't go through with the plan to kill the humans! Please don't eat me!"

Everyone in the room winced at that. Though Alice admitted for some people she couldn't be sure if it was from guilt or because of the racket the rabbit was making.

"Silence," Juri said calmly and coldly. The rabbit girl shut her mouth instantly, though she was still quivering in fear.

That handled her family all looked around at one another, judging what their next course of action should be. "So what's the proper way of saying 'I hope you all die, and I'm going to try to be the one that kills you?'" Marisa asked.

Alice shrugged. "Well the first question is do we want to even send them back a message?"

"Oh we want to send back a message," Flandre said leaning back. "After all, we want to kill as many of them as possible to help our friends right? So we want to make them angry."

Alice considered for a moment. "Then we probably don't want to be proper anyway. If our goal is to insult them as much as possible…"

"Oh, I can do that!" Marisa said with a smile. "Let me start on something. Should probably add unnecessary profanity too…"

"Don't overdo it," Patchouli said. "There are plenty of ways to insult them without resorting to crass language."

As the two began working on the best way to declare war on someone Alice turned her attention back to the rabbit. "So what should we do with her? We can't send her back. That would be showing weakness on our part. They'd be more likely to ignore us. We need them angry and a little scared."

The rabbit whimpered, but kept silent.

Flandre rubbed her hands together. "Hm… and the Lunarians don't care about prisoners. Still they don't need to know what happened to her. And it might be fun having a pet rabbit."

Huian nodded. "We could use more staff I suppose. Though we'd have to keep her under key until we'd destroyed the lunar army."

"Ah, while she's kind of pathetic, I do remember that moon rabbits can communicate over long distances with those ears," Dinah said pointedly.

Juri raised an eyebrow. "I see." She drew her sword. "Well that's unfortunate."

The rabbit's eyes grew wide, but Huian struck a pressure point, rendering the youkai mercifully unconscious.

Alice nodded at her daughter. "Messy. But that gives me an idea."

Byakuren smiled slightly as Unzan moved Ichirin to a open futon at the side of the room. The woman could use the rest. Really they all could, but Byakuren was adept at altering her bodies limits.

The smile faded as she turned back to her work. Eirin had taken in a number of the wounded they'd found, and the villages scattered

about had taken in a great number more, but there were only so many that could be healed.

And so it was the temple's duty to take in the dying.

Byakuren carefully checked the last two patients in the room, making sure the survivor was comfortable, and carefully drawing a white sheet over the one that had passed away. She then walked out back to the well, to purify herself before checking in on the rest of the temple and starting the rounds again.

The moon shone brightly on the white rocks of the garden. Byakuren moved to the solitary well, carefully drew the bucket out from the well by hand, then poured the cold water over her body. Fortunately she could dry herself magically, so she didn't have to waste time changing between outfits. She repeated the process twice more, before returning the bucket and turning towards the presence that had been cowering in the corner of the gardens. "You can come out now. Violence will only come to those that bring violence with them in this temple."

The creature that slowly stepped into the light was a rabbit youkai. "Um, are you Byakuren Hijiri?"

Byakuren put on her most comforting smile, and stepped back to give the youkai some room. "Indeed child. Forgive me for not finding you earlier, but we are busy with the wounded here. Do you have a message from Eirin?"

The rabbit shuddered and shook her head. "Forgive me, but I'm a rabbit in service to Lord Shimeiri of the moon. I come bearing you an offer of peace."

Byakuren paused. So this was the face of their enemy? The moon rabbit seemed to shrink from her gaze. Perhaps their foes wanted to present a less aggressive face? Or maybe they sent this one as a sacrifice? Or maybe they just didn't care?

Still there was no reason not to hear their request.

"While I'm glad to hear about a possible truce between the Earth and the Moon, Toramaru Shou is still the leader of this temple. I will lead you to her." Byakuren turned and headed into the temple, her heightened senses allowing her to easily make sure the rabbit youkai followed her into the temple.

She deliberately slowed as they passed the rooms where the wounded and dying lay. Glancing back she tried to read the youkai's face for any sign that the rabbit noticed the pain and suffering it's masters had caused, but the youkai seemed focused entirely on Byakuren. The fallen nun sighed, and continued down the long corridor of the grain silo turned ship.

As she entered the main temple she found Shou already there. The woman was sitting and meditating in front of the statue of Buddha, the fires and reflected light giving her almost a halo of light. Shou had been spending a lot of her free time in meditation after the barrier collapsed. Byakuren was a little worried that the tiger youkai might be obsessing over something, but Shou had seemed merely contemplative when she was working, so Byakuren was unwilling to press the issue.

She reached out magically and rang the gong lightly to summon the rest of the temple. Ichirin would probably still be sleeping, and Unzan would stand watch over her, but Murasa, Nazrin and Nue should be present as well.

Shou's eyes opened at the note from the gong. She stayed in the lotus position but nodded to Byakuren before turning to the rabbit youkai. "Are you a supplicant?"

"Um, I'm a messenger…" the rabbit youkai said, backing up again.

Her movement took her to the door, where she nearly bumped into Nazrin. "Oi, there's really only the one door, so could you please

move?" Nazrin asked. The rabbit jumped forward at the sudden voice, then stood looking around nervously in the middle of the room.

They'd definitely sent a paranoid messenger, Byakuren decided.

Nazrin walked up to where Shou was sitting and flopped down next to her. The mouse youkai looked attentive, but irreverent. Which was actually one of her jobs.

Nue flew in the door shortly after. She'd abandoned her disguise when the barrier fell, though she still pretended to be a bird when she gave out her cry over the morgue. Some things were just part of a youkai's nature.

Murasa was the last to appear, walking though the wall grumbling about missing her sleep. The ghost set her anchor down and leaned on the wall across from Nue.

After Nue moved off to the side Shou spoke again., "So what is the message?"

The rabbit pulled out a piece of parchment. She took a deep breath and attempted to read it as smoothly as possible. "It reads as follows: To the Myouren Temple."

"I Lord Tenshou, now the ruler of the Lunarians, have unfortunately found myself in conflict with the people of Earth. The Humans who intruded on the moon have been dealt with. However there are those among the youkai who are even more guilty."

"We are uncertain if you know, but several youkai invaded our beloved home, and slew many of our citizens in an unprovoked attack. We thought we had punished those responsible for the action, and dropped the matter despite the injuries given to us, but we have learned that the instigator of those events, Yukari Yakumo, has made plans for her resurrection, and that several youkai groups are aiding in it."

Byakuren narrowed her eyes. This sounded a lot like propaganda. Nue shifted, indicating she wasn't impressed either. Nazrin was doing a good job of looking bored, while Shou's face had remained strangely impassive.

Murasa openly sneered. "Yeah right. Avoiding the trip is easy, but the yama doesn't let anyone back. She may be less then 10,000 years into her reign, but she's no slouch."

The rabbit fidgeted at Murasa's comment but she didn't have a response. After a moment she continued. "We understand that your temple is both a honorable place of worship, and favored by the deities. And we know none of the youkai here are responsible for the attack against the moon. Thus we extend to you an offer of peace, so long as you neither actively support the youkai armies, or hide their warriors in your temple."

Byakuren frowned. "What of the wounded?"

The rabbit twitched, "Um, I don't know. That's all the message says."

"I see. Well, I have our answer."

Shou stood and Byakuren's eyes widened. The tiger youkai's halo wasn't from the lights behind her. She was radiating divine power openly!

Shou slammed her staff on the ground and the crackle of lighting filled the chamber, followed by the boom of thunder. Only Nazrin didn't take a step back.

"Hear my words and repeat them to the dogs that claim to rule the moon! I am Vaiśravana, ruler of the North, leader of the yassha! I am Bishamonten, fortune of strength, god of warriors! You have burned my temples, murdered my priests, and scorned my name. Then you have the audacity to come to my house and speak of 'peace'?"

Shou swung her staff to point at the emissary, who fell backwards in fright. "There is no peace between us! You should have begged for my forgiveness, but you are too foolish and arrogant to even ask for my blessing! Well, I have not been asked, but I shall give you my curse instead. Know this Lunarian! Your war will fail. Your nation will die. And though the skies may seem to rain with blood, your plans will come to nothing. And I shall be there ensuring your defeat. I would say you will regret ignoring my words, but I know you are too arrogant to listen to them."

Shou raised her staff. The glow around her faded slightly, though it still was visible to the naked eye. "Did you hear all that?"

There was a stunned silence for a few seconds, then Nazrin snickered.

Finally the rabbit managed to stammer out, "Y~Y~Y~Yes!"

"Then get going and tell those chumps!" Murasa yelled. Murasa watched the rabbit scramble from the room, then turned to Shou, "Uh, sorry. Didn't mean to steal your thunder there."

Shou smiled. "It's okay Murasa. I shouldn't get all the fun lines after all."

"So, who are the yassha anyway," Nue asked.

"Indian youkai," replied Nazrin. "Also, took you long enough to figure it out, boss."

Shou laughed lightly, "Well you know how dense I can be sometimes."

Byakuren finally recovered enough to bow. "I hadn't realized the post was open so soon. Well, I guess you really are officially the owner of the temple now, Lord Vaiśravana."

"Ah! It was all thanks to you Lady Byakuren. Please don't bow so low!" Shou waved her hands as if to brush off the praise. Byakuren giggled at Shou, while Nazrin shook her head.

"Seriously, you've got a reputation to uphold now Shou." The little mouse gave an exaggerated sigh. "I'm only going to be around for another 30,000 years, so you've gotta get on your game."

Shou just sighed deeply and looked at the ground.

Nue coughed lightly. "Sorry to dampen the mood, but we probably ought to work out a battle plan. Since you did kinda declare war here."

Murasa nodded. "I'm fine with just breaking the face of any Lunarian who comes in here, but there's probably a better strategy then that."

Byakuren looked at Shou. "You seemed to have a moment of prophecy when you spoke to the emissary. Any suggestions?"

"Yes. I don't remember the details, but I think I remember what we were supposed to do," Shou looked at Nue first. "Nue you're the best of us at stealth and deception. You're also a strong fighter. You're going to go out and help the other youkai."

Nue frowned, then reluctantly nodded. "I don't like going off on my own while you all fight together, but you're right. I'm really good at sneaking places and confusing people."

"Thank you Nue," Shou said. "Everyone else should stay here and guard the temple. We'll offer it as a refugee center to any human or youkai that wants to stay out of the battle. Ichirin and Unzan will have to tend the wounded, while everyone else stands guard," Shou continued.

"Eh? But I wanted to get in on the fighting." Murasa said.

Nazrin stood. "And what are you doing? Just because you're officially my boss now doesn't mean you can ditch me whenever you want."

Byakuren help up a hand. "Nazrin, we'll all be needed to guard the temple, won't we?"

Shou nodded. "I think if there are enough of us they'll ignore the temple. We don't have room to gather an army after all. However we need to contribute to the battle as well." She patted Nazrin on the head. "I'm sorry Nazrin, but while Hijiri and Murasa have the strength, they just can't keep watch over enough places on their own. They need you, your mice, and your dowsing abilities to be able to keep the place safe."

"Yeah, hard to hit someone if you don't know they're there," Murasa admitted.

Nazrin frowned deeply but nodded. "Alright. But you be careful Shou. Your power hasn't increased much, since Bishamonten's faith was mostly blown up. You can still die."

Shou lifted the jeweled pagoda. "I'll be careful. But my enemies should be the ones fearing for their lives. Sadly I think they lack the wisdom to even pay attention to me."

Lord Tenshou frowned as Shimeri approached. The man had the look of someone who was expecting to have to think quickly. This did not bode well. People who had succeeded rarely needed to search for explanations.

Still he had to ask. "What news?"

"I fear our diplomacy has not born fruit," Shimeri said. "The Myouren temple refused rather dramatically, and well…" He pulled out a box and opened it. "This was found where our messenger was supposed to return to. It bears the seal of the Scarlet Devil Mansion.

Lord Tenshou looked into the box and saw the severed ear of a moon rabbit, along with three scrolls. 'Disgusting,' he thought.

"Is there anything of worth on the scrolls," he asked, "or is it just more barbaric threats?"

"The first is more barbaric insults My Lord. I wouldn't suggest reading it unless you dislike your mother, and desire knowledge on the breeding habits of farm animals." Shimeri frowned. "The second scroll is a recipe for rabbit stew."

Lord Tenshou knew he shouldn't ask, but he did anyway. "And the third?"

Shimeri winced at that. "Another stew recipe, but with a… different main ingredient."

Lord Tenshou pondered the meaning of that for a few seconds then unconsciously stepped back. He shook his head. "While this will make our plans more difficult, it's perhaps a good thing we're going to destroy those devils."

"Do you want me to prepare a detachment to assist with the attack there?" Shimeri asked.

"No. Rabbits would just be a waste against them. Was there anything of note in the Myouren temple's refusal?"

Shimeiri shook his head "The tiger youkai there made some claims to godhood, but nothing that should be considered of worth."

Tenshou consulted his power again and nodded as the results returned unchanged. "Then your target is Eientei."

Author's Note: There's no way I can fit this explanation into the story reasonably, so I might as well give the full info here.

Buddhist deities in several sects are mortals or powerful beings that are given their positions for a period of 60,000 years (1000 60 year cycles). This includes things like the the Yama positions and of course Vaiśravana/Bishamonten. In keeping with Japanese standards I mixed the deities, because that's what happens when religions end up in Japan. Hopefully this explains why our favorite tiger youkai is now the fortune of strength, (and also why said deity allowed their closest ally to stay with her even after the training period.)

Chapter 12

Maribel looked around the huge antechamber.

She wished she could have come here earlier. Right now she was impressed by the massive stained glass windows and huge pillars, but she couldn't enjoy them. She sighed then looked at Ran. "So where's the person in charge?"

"I don't know. She doesn't exactly have a throne room or anything." Ran looked about. "Ah, just a reminder, the ruler of this place is a satori."

Maribel nodded. "Right, so she can read hearts."

"It's more then that. She can read your thoughts, and she can't really help but blurt them out or answer them directly. This is going to be an annoying conversation for you," Ran said.

That did sound annoying to her. Maribel glanced at Ran, "Why not annoying for you?"

"Well, I'm a fox, so I don't care if I talk when I communicate."

Maribel wasn't sure if that explained everything or nothing.

"Oh, hello there aunty. What are you doing here with a human?"

Maribel jumped at the sudden sound behind her while Ran's tails bristled. Spinning around she saw three young girls in dark dresses staring at her. Each had a set of cat ears in addition to their normal ears and they were all staring at Maribel with curious, predatory eyes. They seemed like the feral equivalents of Chen. Still none of them looked older then Kanon, and they weren't overtly hostile.

Ran smoothed out her tails. "I see you've gotten better at sneaking up on people, girls." The three grinned at Ran's rebuke. "Maribel, this

is Io, Hiso, and Sanso." Sadly Ran made no indication as to which was which. Maybe she was afraid of getting it wrong? Ran turned back to the trio. "We're here to see Satori. Or your mother if she's about."

The triplets nodded. "Mama and Satori are with Lady Reiuji," Io (?) said.

"When the barrier went down Utsuho went a little crazy. Apparently she got overwhelmed with faith," Hiso (?) added.

Ran's eyes opened wide at that and her ears flipped back. "She's alright now though right! She's not planning on scouring the surface world again, right?"

"Again!" Maribel asked.

"Nah, she was able to give most of the faith to the goddesses up top," Sanso (?) said. "But mama and Miss Satori are helping her still. She said it was like having a million people screaming for mercy in her mind."

Maribel shuddered at the girls calm explanation. She could barely begin to imagine the horror that must have gone through people's minds. To have a million of them blaming you personally…

Then a thought arose from her mind. Perhaps she could find a way to make the person responsible for this hear that before he died.

Then she shuddered and hid that thought away. She didn't like what it said about her.

Maribel started again when one of the girls spoke up. "Anyway, do you want us to bring Miss Satori here? It's gotta be kinda important if you didn't send Chen."

Ran nodded. "Yes, thank you. We can go to them if they need to stay with Utsuho."

"Nah, the bird brain is probably sleeping now. We'll go find out." The three girls took flight and disappeared down a hallway.

"We should go find a room to sit in," Ran said, heading down another corridor. "It's a fair distance to the reactor. They'll be a little while."

After a little while they found a sitting room with a fireplace going. A dog in the room looked up but went back to sleep when Ran yipped politely at it.

After the first five minutes Maribel reached into a gap and grabbed a book. She wasn't sure how much she'd be able to read, but it would give her something to do other then sit and be miserable.

About twenty minutes later the door opened.

Maribel immediately guessed this was the satori. While the body of the youkai was that of a short woman or girl, the strange heart eye that floated around her looked almost exactly like the pictures of the legendary monster.

She walked in and bowed. "Nice to meet you Ran, Maribel. Utsuho is doing fine now, and yes Maribel we Satori can't be killed unless the person empties their mind. But we can still be hurt very badly. So please don't try it."

And now Maribel began to understand what Ran meant when she suggested the conversation might be annoying.

"Ah sorry. It's been awhile since I talked to anyone except my pets. I'll try to let you get in a word edgewise," Satori said as Maribel opened her mouth. Maribel sighed. Clearly this was going to be a very one sided conversation. Satori looked over at Ran. "Ah, yes please do."

Ran nodded. "This is a formal meeting so I need to speak the words." Ran closed her eyes as she often did when focusing on a spell, then said, "As Gensoukyo no longer officially exists our pact

between the members of the underground and the Yakumo family is hereby rescinded. You may walk about the surface as you see fit, though we will not protect you on your necessary journeys." Ran smiled. "I'd offer to help guard the city of the ancients, but really now that the oni are here that'd be an empty gesture."

Satori smiled in return. "Indeed. Anyone who can get through the entire oni race will not be stopped by force of arms alone."

She turned to Maribel. "Yes, that's right. We were banished down here for being 'disturbing.'" Maribel flushed as she realized that her thought had once again been picked over. "Oh, don't worry. I don't find that insulting. And your embarrassment speaks well for you."

Maribel shook her head to clear it. "We should probably get back to business."

Satori nodded, "Yes. So what brought you here? A war? Hm…"

Ran sighed. "A war against the moon. I know you can't really force the oni to fight. But you, your sister and your pets are all fairly strong in unique ways. Your help would be invaluable."

Satori stood and began to pace. "You aren't sure if you're going to win. But you bear a lot of hatred for them." The sight on Maribel's burnt home appeared in her mind. "Ah. I'm sorry to hear that."

This time Maribel was glad she didn't have to put her thoughts to words.

Satori sighed. "As you said, I can't force any of the other underground youkai to fight. I'm no ruler. The only reason I 'own' this place is because no one bothered to move us from our sleep when they relocated hell. And no one but the oni are powerful enough to get me and my pets to leave." She looked at the two again. "In fact I don't really have a reason to fight for the surface."

"But because my pets have friends up there, I'll let them join you. I'm a combat liability, and Utsuho shouldn't be allowed to fight directly right now. But Orin can help. And Koishi will join in even if I tell her not to. Perhaps a few of my pets will be interested as well." Satori shrugged. "That's all I can offer."

It didn't sound like much, but Ran seemed pleased. "Good. Those two should each be able to fight a Lunarian solo. Just warn them not to underestimate their foes." Ran's confidence boosted her spirits a little. Still Maribel wondered if there was some other way to get help.

Satori sighed. "I'll try. You know how those children are." She turned to Maribel again. "And I'll put out word in the underground of the battle. Some people may come out just for fun."

"This isn't fun for some of us," Maribel stated.

"I know," Satori said with a sympathetic glance.

Ran stood, "This might be about justice, but you can't be picky about your allies. Especially given a lot of us are, well, monsters."

Satori nodded. "Still, even most monsters destruction on that level mildly disturbing. These fallen Lunarians seem the equal in malice to any youkai."

Renko was worried about Maribel, but hopefully being active would keep her friend's mind off things. Chen set a quick pace to the Mansion, and soon they found themselves at the gate, where Huian was standing.

"Hello, Renko, Chen. What did the tengu have to say?" the gatekeeper asked.

"They aren't going to leave their mountain," Chen said with a bit of disgust.

Renko nodded grimly, "They said they'd try to help, but…"

"It won't be much," Huian sighed. "In that case I'm afraid we'll have to go on the defense too." She smiled a bit. "Fortunately, I think we've managed to draw their attention. I think we'll get our fair share of attackers."

"Huh?" Renko looked at Chen, who seemed just as confused as she did.

Huian turned towards the front door. "It will be easier to explain after I show you. Besides, I believe Marisa wanted to speak to you about something, Renko."

"Really?" Renko wondered what that was.

The three headed to the main dining hall. All the residents of the mansion seemed to be there, as well as a new girl. Small with black hair and a bandage on her head. Currently it looked like Juri was giving her instructions on how to polish silverware under Flandre's supervision.

The rest of the mansion, however, looked like they were preparing for battle. Alice was inspecting a full contingent of armed dolls, checking every weapon. Dinah and Koakuma were labeling potions and and other trinkets, and Marisa had acquired an ancient straight bladed sword, and a passel of wands. Patchouli was just reading, but Renko recognized the book as one of the magician's more powerful grimoires.

Juri of course was focused purely on the silverware.

"Yes. That's it, Flopsy. Now, please demonstrate how to set a place properly."

The girl winced and reached towards the bandage on her head, but Koakuma lightly slapped her hand away. "Don't scratch it or we won't be able to regenerate your ears later."

"Sorry Miss Koakuma," the girl said returning to the silverware. "But could you not call me that name?"

"I'm your master now, so your name is Flopsy," Flandre said from the opposite side of the table. "If you wanted a different name you should have asked your previous owner for one."

Flopsy groaned but continued trying to place all the forks and spoons in their correct order. Koakuma shrugged and said, "It could have been worse." Patchouli gave the little devil a look, but Marisa snickered.

"Wait, so is that a moon rabbit?" Chen asked.

Dinah nodded. "They sent her here to demand our surrender, because they thought she was expendable. We offered her a change of employers."

Renko wondered how voluntary that change was, especially given the missing ears, and the rabbit girls obvious fear. Still, she wasn't going to question a vampire in their own house. She liked her blood to stay inside her. And she trusted Huian and Marisa to keep people from being too hard on the girl.

Looking up from her book towards Renko and Chen, Patchouli asked, "I take it the tengu remained stubbornly isolationist?"

Chen sighed. "Yeah. I guess no one's gonna be surprised."

"No, but I was hoping they'd be more reasonable," Alice said.

"Still, we'll do our part," Flandre said cheerfully. "If there aren't enough of them fighting here, we'll go hunting outside for sure." She looked over at the magicians. "Unless you people will change your minds and let us attack the capitol while they're out…"

"We've been over that. That only works on opponents who have good communications. It'd just be a waste for us," Patchouli said.

"Besides I don't have a rocket ready."

"Any word on the kappa?" Marisa asked.

Chen shook her head. "They're in lockdown. I bet Nitori's probably cooking something up, but she's pretty brave for a kappa. The rest will probably just leave weapons out for the tengu."

That drew a smile from Marisa. "Well Nitori's sure to surprise someone. Ah, speaking of surprises."

The black white magician walked up to Renko. Renko saw something pass over Marisa's face, before the woman reached into her hat and pulled out an octagonal box. "I was gonna wait until you'd gotten a little better to give this to you, but, well…" The woman looked away. "A lot of things might happen soon. So here you go, an early graduation present." Marisa dropped the little box into Renko's hands.

Renko stared down at the small box, easily recognizing the symbols carved into the metal. Chen took in a deep breath beside her. "That's…"

"A mini-hakkero," Renko said in wonder.

"Marisa…"

"Mother."

The magicians all seemed to be stunned by the item. Even Flandre had stood and was looking over Renko's shoulder. Marisa laughed weakly. "It's not the original of course. That's the one I made when I was figuring out how to repair mine, after Kourin passed away. Still it'll add a whole lotta kick to your magic. It's how I managed to fight people like Flandre when I was still a human."

"That and being good at dodging," Flandre said with a smile.

"I, I can't just take this," Renko said. "Isn't this an artifact? I mean, it holds the undying flame. It had to have taken years to make."

Renko winced as Marisa rapped her on the head. "Hey, didn't you learn anything from me? Borrowing is an important skill for being a magician."

"You're mistaking magicians for thieves again Marisa dear," Alice said.

Marisa waved the comment off. "Anyway if you're worried about it, you can give it back to me after you die." Marisa closed Renko's hand around the magical reactor. "… and I don't want this back for a long time. Okay?"

Renko looked at the faces around her, and for the first time she actually realized this was probably the last time they'd all be there. This might be goodbye for all of them. Tears started to sting her eyes. She sniffed and brought the Hakkero up to her chest. "Be sure," she wiped her eyes quickly, "be sure that you're around to get it back it okay. Make sure you're all here."

There was a tinkling of crystals, and Renko felt two tiny arms fall on her shoulders. "Don't worry about us, fate is on our side. This time, anyway. You just focus on taking care of yourself. You're fun to have around." Flandre turned to Chen. "And you should try to stay alive too little cat. Ran would be no fun to taunt without you."

Chen laughed as she wiped away some tears. "Don't worry about me. I've still got nine lives left."

Suika'd appropriated a skyscraper for her drinking tonight. The view was nice, if you didn't look down, and the concrete didn't really bother her much. It would have been nice to see the city when it was all lit up though. Maybe she could draw enough of the surviving humans in the area to pull that off. She wasn't really sure how they generated the electricity though.

As the thoughts passed through her mind she took a long pull on her gourd. She'd gotten into another fight with Yuugi.

She wondered which one of them was more messed up. Yuugi for underestimating the Lunarians, or Suika for constantly fighting for other people's causes.

"'We'll fight when they attack our city, and not before. We gave up on the surface world remember?' Then what's the point of our strength?" Suika sighed. "Seriously, just because they can't beat us now doesn't mean it won't change in a couple generations."

Her thoughts were interrupted as a girl flew out of the sky and landed next to her.

She looked over at her guest. "Hey, is it alright for someone like you to be here? After all heaven isn't supposed to interfere with mortal affairs unless it's 'necessary'."

Tenshi shrugged. "We're in charge of heaven, so if we do it, it was necessary. That's why we're celestials." The girl sat down on the broken concrete of the roof. "Besides it's not like anyone would notice and complain. Heaven doesn't need so many celestials for so few humans, so the hunting shinigami are doing overtime. Everyone's busy worrying about their own skin right now."

"Hm?" Suika laid back and stared up at the starry sky. "So why are you out here? I thought you liked the fighting?"

"Eh they're only allowed to attack me once a week, so most of them show up, swear, and then go somewhere else. It's boring, so I decided to hide out for a bit."

Suika chuckled. "More like you don't want angry death gods around your family."

Tenshi was silent.

Suika looked up at the moon. She remembered the last time she'd gone there. The event that had caused her to leave Gensoukyo for a time. "So are you going to wander around and beat people up?"

Tenshi shrugged. "Eh, I thought I'd hang around you. I shouldn't be picking on weaklings. And I'm not gonna mess around with the final conflict. That'd piss off the Yama, and then I might get in real trouble. I hear she got a new ferryman and a strong hunter shinigami just for this mess."

Suika took another long pull from her gourd. "You can do that if you want, but only if you promise me something."

"Huh? Promise you what?"

Suika closed her eyes. "If I tell you to stay out of a fight, you stay out of it. Understand?"

The celestial loomed over her, "Hm, why so serious all the sudden?"

Suika ignored the girl's confusion. "Not gonna explain. That's for them to do. If they want to."

Suika started as Tenshi grabbed the Oni's gourd and took a drink out of it. "Fine," Tenshi said, "but if I get bored I'll go play somewhere else."

"Fine with me," Suika said with a grin, causing Tenshi to bristle in annoyance. The oni laughed. She oasionally worried that Tenshi might be growing up, but obviously that wasn't the case.

As soon as Maribel entered the room Yuyuko moved to hug her. She allowed herself to droop in the ghost's chilly but supportive arms. "I'm sorry for your loss," Yuyuko whispered. "I wish I could have spoken to you earlier, but it seems you're very busy."

"Yes," Maribel managed to choke out. There were no tears. She was too tired for that. But she let herself relax for a while.

Finally she sighed and pulled herself upright. "Busy is one word for it."

"I suppose you've heard?" Ran asked.

"Yes. We're already starting to get some souls in already," Youmi replied.

Maribel's gut twisted. She wanted to ask but…

Yuyuko apparently saw her look. "I'm sorry, but I can't tell you that. The judges have become more strict now. And to tell the truth, I don't think it would do anything but hurt you more."

Maribel nodded. She hoped her parents were here in the netherworld now, but Yuyuko was right. Knowing that wouldn't make her feel better.

Right now she had to focus on her own survival. And vengeance.

"They aren't going to leave Gensoukyo in peace either," Ran said. "We could use any help we could get. I know your power Yuyuko…"

Yuyuko frowned and the chill around her increased. "That power is best left dormant." Maribel was surprised. She'd never seen the ghost look that agitated. It passed quickly though. "Besides the yama are all cracking down on rules. Heaven isn't happy that the number of celestials is being reduced. Thus any infractions from the lands of the dead will be judged harshly, to avoid people claiming favoritism."

Maribel sighed. "So you're saying you can't help either?"

"I'll help!"

The three all turned to Youmi who was starting to blush. "I'm alive, well sort of. At least I'm allowed in the world of the living. So if I fight

it's alright! Um, if you'll let me Lady Yuyuko."

Yuyuko pulled out her fan and pouted. "But Youmi, I've arranged an omiai with a nice young man that day. It would be so difficult to reschedule."

Maribel's eyebrow twitched at the Yuyuko's hurt expression, and the half ghost's confusion. Then she chuckled. "Is being mean to your bodyguards a tradition?"

"Of course not," Yuyuko replied.

"Probably," sighed Youmi.

"Yes," stated Ran.

Yuyuko folded her fan. "You're no fun." Her expression turned serious again. "But you have my permission to do as you see fit Youmi. However you have to wait until the attack begins before venturing out. I don't want Heaven knowing about our actions until it's over. That way it will stay legal."

Youmi nodded. "As you demand Lady Yuyuko." She smiled at Ran and Maribel. "Don't worry about that. With my speed I'll be in the fray as soon as the battle starts."

Maribel sighed in relief. Another person who was actually on their side. And probably for the right reasons. "Thank you, Youmi. And thank you, Yuyuko."

"Thank me after the battle," Yuyuko said softly.

Authors notes: While utterly unimportant past here, the names of the kassha girls translate to Sulfer, Oxygen, and Arsenic. Much like how Rin translates to Phosphorus.

Chapter 13

As Lord Tenshou spoke Jiyuwan looked around the assembled nobles of the moon. He tried to get a sense of what they all were thinking. His lord was lacking tenure, and Jiyuwan imagined there were several people in the crowd who might want to kill the man to take the throne.

However, it seemed those people were willing to wait to achieve that goal. Most of the faces in the crowed were servile, bored, or eager. There were but three exceptions.

Sareseno sat quietly in the upper seats writing his story. His eyes were filled with grief and anger, but his focus was only on his writing. He was no threat physically, and Jiyuwan was willing to ignore his threat politically. He'd promised after all.

His lord's sister, Shoutoku, was far more more difficult to read. She'd alternated between fiery rage at the earth and at her brother for no real good reason. Jiyuwan was inclined to believe she was insane in fact, but this was a fairly recent occurrence. The swordsman wondered if Lord Tenshou had revealed something that had set the woman off, but it was not his place to ask. And he wouldn't get an answer anyway. Strangely today she seemed to be looking at everyone with an expression of disgust. Herself included. Still her posture was passive.

Finally in the back his own son Akiyoshi stood presenting an impressive aura of confidence, but Jiyuwan could see from the boy's stance that he was uncertain. However it was not the uncertainty of an assassin, but the stance that the young man had when he was afraid he was going to disappoint someone. It worried Jiyuwan, but he could not deal with that problem publicly.

Lord Tenshou finished his speech and most of the nobles applauded. Jiyuwan hadn't listened to the speech closely, but he started paying

attention now.

Now was when the plan was going to be discussed.

"I know you all would like to simply end this matter in one fell swoop, but I fear Eirin's sabotage has taken away our most potent weapons," Lord Tenshou sighed. "Thus we must plan for a multi stage attack on the youkai of Gensoukyo." He pointed at a crude map of the new environs of Gensoukyo. "Our first attack will focus on making sure that a barrier can't be raised against us. Lord Shimeri will lay siege to Eientei with most of the rabbits, preventing Eirin from sealing off the moon. Meanwhile our main force will be deployed to remove the Yakumo and their lackeys. I will lead that force personally."

"However we need to make sure Gensoukyo's other forces don't interfere. Thus I've assigned you drop points that best match with your abilities. And I have a few special orders."

There was some muttering at that, but everyone waited to see what those orders were before complaining too loudly. After all, Lord Tenshou's power was well known.

Lord Tenshou pointed at the Youkai mountain. "First my personal bodyguard, Jiyuwan, will interfere with the Tengu. He shall keep their army locked in place."

The murmuring increased though it was more impressed now. Jiyuwan had to admit he was slightly impressed as well. Sacrificing your most loyal piece early in the game required courage. It would make the rest of the demands more palatable.

Admittedly his Lord probably believed that he would simply strike the tengu and retreat after dealing some serious damage. But Jiyuwan wasn't planning on retreating. Unless he was ordered to of course.

His Lord continued "Chamaka, I need you to keep the fairies from running rampant."

The man frowned. "I can understand how I'd be good at that but shouldn't that be a job for everyone?"

"The youkai already outnumber us 40 to 1. Adding the annoyance of a group of undying cannon fodder will only make the situation worse." Lord Tenshou explained. "However you might be able to get the mindless creatures to actually understand fear. That will take the pressure off of everyone."

Chamaka sighed and shrugged. "Very well. With luck my actions will draw the attention of a worthier foe."

Lord Tenshou nodded. "Akiyoshi, I want you to…"

"Forgive me, but I will be acting on my own," Akiyoshi said. "I disagree with your actions."

Lord Tenshou started as if struck, but Jiyuwan had to fight to keep a smile from forming.

Akiyoshi straightened his posture and continued. "While I seek to find the traitors who murdered the Watatsuki sisters, I have no interest in this war against the youkai. However I understand that it will, for better or worse, decide the fate of the lunar empire. So I shall stand at the gate of the netherworld and guard it from both sides. The honorable dead should not be leaving, and there will be no enemies attempting to hide there. Anyone that attempts to pass the gate will face my blade."

The boy then turned and left as the crowd called out after him. Lord Tenshou looked over at Jiyuwan sternly, but all he could do was shrug. He'd always told the boy to follow his own path.

Perhaps Akiyoshi would succeed where he had failed.

Lord Tenshou closed his eyes and rubbed them. Obviously he was trying to replan things. After a moment he nodded. "Very well then. Taruma, Takiko. I need you to guard this path here. Lord Roun, I

need you to take your forces and attack the Scarlet Devil Mansion. After 15 minutes have passed. One of our other attacks will likely cause the mansion to split its forces. You will find them to be easier prey when split."

The three people he named all looked confused, but it was Roun who spoke. "My Lord, I have 4 warriors. Does a simple band of youkai really need 7 Lunarians to kill them all?"

Jiyuwan decided it was time for him to speak. "These youkai are feared even by their peers. The other youkai tried and failed to eliminate them. While the attack was mostly by lesser youkai, they certainly have planned to fight off powerful invaders and have practice in using those plans. You should consider them almost as dangerous as Eirin Yagokoro."

Lord Tenshou waited for the three Lunarians to nod their understanding before continuing. "I have a few more select targets for some of you, and I want the rest of the army to drop where I indicate. Remember your goal is to kill as many youkai as possible. Do not worry about collateral damage either. The Earth is tainted. None of it's creatures are worth your life.

"Brother."

Everyone turned to Shoutoku. Jiyuwan once again noticed a fire in her eyes. Finally he could place it. It was the fires of revenge.

"Will I be placed near the oni?" she asked.

Lord Tenshou smiled. "Yes sister. You will attack here." He stabbed at a location in the ruined city outside of Gensoukyo. "And here you will kill Suika Ibuki."

The shrine was bustling when Aya dropped onto the well swept grounds. She shouldn't really be surprised, she supposed. After all

there was going to be a war. And with the Great Tengu's proclamation…

She shook her head. She could worry about that later. First she cleaned her hands and mouth, then got in line for the offertory box. Most of the tengu moved quickly, so she didn't really need to wait long.

Aya tossed the coins into the donation box then clapped twice and bowed her head. She wasn't really sure if this was the best shrine for her prayer, but the gods here were a little better at service then most other shrines.

"You will find it more likely that your prayer will be answered if you don't think of us like a quick mart," came a regal voice to her left.

Aya stepped to the side and bowed to the goddess. "Sorry, but it worked right?"

The war goddess had obviously pulled out her old regalia. Gone was the snake rope. In its place was some solid looking chest armor, and the goddess was carrying the daisho as well. Aya also guessed the large fan opposite the paired swords was a tessen. Aya privately admitted she was a little impressed.

Kanako sighed. "Only because you have slightly more faith then the average supplicant. And because I wish to change the outcome of this battle."

"So will you give me an idea where I can help out most?" Aya asked the war goddess.

"Given that your army will not march at my command, normal tactics will be useless." The goddess pointed towards the forest of magic. "There is someone you know there who can answer your question better then I can. The one you never wrote a story on. Her prophecy holds your answers."

Aya raised an eyebrow at that. "How did you…?"

Kanako smiled. "Goddess."

Aya doubted that was the truth, but she couldn't really argue, especially not in the god's own shrine. So she simply bowed. "Well then I'd better get on it. It might take her a while to remember the spell." She waved and took flight.

She took her time moving down the mountain. The place seemed oddly quiet for a future battlefield. Only the occasional kappa sealing their homes up or grouped tengu patrol showed how close war was.

Soon Aya was out of the mountains, into the forest beneath. After a few moments she sighed and stopped. "Come out, Hatate."

"Tch, you're getting too good at this."

Her 'rival' reporter walked casually out of the shadows she was hiding in, cellphone camera out as always. "Don't bother asking me to go back, I'm getting a piece of this story no matter what."

Aya considered pulling out her fan and making the other tengu mind her own business. "Aren't you more interested in the duels? I mean, it's not every day that the Great Tengu proclaims he's going to fight an entire invasion force one on one. And if he loses, he's offering his title to the tengu that beats his killer. That'll be news for some time right?"

"Exactly!" Hatate pointed at Aya. "There's no way a reporter like you would ditch that unless there was something bigger going on!"

"Something bigger?" Aya looked at Hatate, then laughed bitterly. "Something bigger? Of course there's something bigger going on! All Gensoukyo is under attack! This war will decide the fate of everyone left on earth, and we Tengu have chosen to be a very small part of that."

Aya took a breath before barreling on. "So yes, there's something bigger going on. Something so big I can't just sit it out and be a reporter. The 'great tengu army' will be a diversion at best. Ran is going to be the one on the front lines, and I'm going to find a way to help her and the rest of Gensoukyo out!" Aya turned around and started stalking through the forest. "So there's no scoop here. It's just another random youkai getting into a fight. Nothing the tengu should care about."

"Aya!"

Aya continued through the underbrush for a few minutes, Hatate doggedly pursuing her. Finally she stopped and looked behind her.

The younger tengu stood their fidgeting. "Aya, I don't know why the Great Tengu is doing what he's doing. And, well even if I'm not as close to the rest of Gensoukyo as you, I don't want to see them hurt. But… I'm not good at fighting. All I have is this camera and the ability to dodge danmaku. That won't work long in a real fight." She started flipping her camera open and closed. "But I want to try to do something…"

Aya paused. Hatate was right. The younger tengu couldn't stand up to any foe who was capable of fighting, say, Momiji. The kappa's camera could protect her from magical assaults, but not a sword between the ribs.

Aya turned around and sighed. "Fine. Let's find out where I'm going first. Then I'll see if I want you tagging along."

The two were silent for the rest of the journey. Finally Aya reached her destination. A small house in a clearing, with smoke rising from the chimney. That was a good sign. It indicated that it's owner hadn't forgotten where she lived again.

"I don't remember ever seeing this place," Hatate said as Aya knocked on the door.

"The magician here doesn't make a lot of waves," Aya replied.

After a few moments the door opened. The short magician there wore an outfit similar to Marisa's, but in red and white instead of black. On her shoulder was a white cat, and instead of a witches hat she had a red ribbon tied in the rabbit ear style. "Oh hello! Who are you two and what brings you here?" she asked. "Oh, and do you remember my name?"

Aya ignored Hatate's snicker and simply replied. "We've met before, Ellen. I'm Aya. The girl behind me is Hatate. And I'm here to get a fortune. A real fortune."

"Oh thanks!" Ellen replied. "Come in, come in. I'll get some tea." Ellen waved them into the cluttered sitting room and cleaned off three chairs.

"Who is she?" Hatate whispered to Aya as the magician cleaned.

Aya smirked. "The best fortune teller in Gensoukyo who doesn't cheat."

When the sudden cleaning was finally done and a pot of tea was acquired, the three women sat down, while the cat inspected them. After it determined that Hatate was the most likely to be annoyed by cats, it jumped up on her lap and started purring.

"So you wanted a fortune from me? How do you feel about tarot cards?" Ellen asked as she poured tea for her guests.

Aya picked up her cup and took a sip, smirking as Hatate found the cat was keeping her cup just out of reach. "Sorry Ellen, but like I said, I wanted a real reading."

Ellen frowned. "Are you sure? No one's ever happy when I give one of those." She smiled brightly again. "I could do tea leaves perhaps? Everyone likes tea leaves."

"No. I need a real fortune," Aya repeated. "Lives are at stake."

Ellen sighed. "Well, I'll do it. But only because you paid me."

"Uh, we haven't paid you yet," Hatate said.

Aya quickly put a bag of coins down, "But we really need the fortune."

Ellen nodded then stood up. "All right. I hope it's worth it."

The magician pulled out a grimoire from one of the many bookshelves around and started flipping though pages. Hatate tried to shoo the cat off her lap a few times, then gave up and turned to Aya. "Shouldn't we tell her what we want answered?"

"Hm… The best fortune tellers answer the question you should have asked," Aya replied. "Not the one you wanted to ask."

Ellen began reciting the spell. The soft words began to blend together in the air, forming an almost palatable flow of magic in the room.

"Hmph, you'd think that it would be able to at least tell us who the great tengu will be," Hatate muttered.

"It doesn't matter to you, for you cannot change it tengu."

Aya and Hatate both stared at Ellen. The small magician's eyes glowed with blue energy, and her posture had completely changed.

"The future has been decided. Your foes' plans are inescapable. When the war ends only the house of eternity, the shrine and the temple will remain in Gensoukyo. This is unavoidable. The rest of the great houses will be swept from the Earth."

"What? Your answer is we can't do anything?" Hatate asked her mouth agape.

Aya shushed her. "What of our futures?"

"There is only one future you two can change. You two who know the power of truth and legend shall battle for the fate of a race, while twin moons look on. There you and your allies will either shatter a moon, or the spirit of nature will die."

Ellen's eyes shifted back to their normal color, and her shoulders slumped slightly. "So, do you regret it?"

Aya shook her head. "I didn't like what I heard, but now I know where we need to go." She frowned. "I just hope Ran and Momiji can take care of themselves."

Hatate looked over at Aya. "She said that only those Lunarians, the Hakurei shrine and the Myouren temple were going to survive this mess! Then she told us to go fighting… somewhere! How is that helpful? Shouldn't we be trying to save our homes? "

"No, the fortune was that those buildings would be standing. Not that they'd survive, or that anyone else would die." Aya's eye's narrowed. "And I know where we need to go and what we need to do."

Hatate sighed. "Well would you mind explaining it to me? Since apparently I'm going there too."

Ellen nodded. "I'd kind of like to know as well. I never get to see these fortunes myself."

"It's actually very simple. There's only two places in Gensoukyo where there would be twin moons…"

Hitomi checked the wards around the shrine again. She wished she could do more, but her enchantments were more use against generic youkai, not whatever the Lunarians were. The best she could hope for was that the wards against evil and bad fortune would turn eyes

away from the shrine. Honestly she was just checking in order to pass the time now. She had done everything she could to prepare.

She wished she could do more.

She wanted to be out there fighting for Gensoukyo's future. Even if there wasn't a barrier anymore, even if the Hakurei shrine didn't mean anything, she still felt a sense of duty to the land. It was her home after all.

"I finished warding the shrine mom."

But Hitomi had someone to look after that was just as important as her home. Maybe even more so.

Hitomi looked up and smiled at Kanon. "Good job. Now we wait."

Kanon looked up at her with a frown. "Um, mommy, why can't we fight like everyone else? I can use the yin yang orbs, just like in practice! I promise I won't slow you down any."

Hitomi's heart twisted within her chest, but she managed to keep a straight face. She carefully took Kanon by the shoulders and looked the young girl in the eye. "Kanon, I know you want to help me, but you haven't finished your training yet. I want you to stay out of all the fighting, alright? If people come to the shrine you're to stay inside. If they enter the shrine you're to run to our safe place, okay?"

Kanon bit her lip, but eventually relented under Hitomi's stare. "Alright mommy. I promise to stay out of your way."

Hitomi pulled her daughter close. "Understand, this is for both of our sakes. If someone does attack, I won't be able to fight properly if I'm worried about you. I know you want to be strong, but now isn't the time."

"Now let's go inside. The moon won't rise for a few hours yet." Hitomi held her daughters hand as they entered the godless shrine.

Mystia checked one last time to make sure all of her stall's stuff was packed away before pulling down the shutters and locking them. She enjoyed her business, and she wasn't about to lose it just because she needed to move.

"So, you're taking off are you?"

Mystia turned at the familiar voice. "Hm? Of course I'm going! That Keine woman is going to be banishing the village right?" Mystia turned back to her cart and started checking the ties. "I'm a youkai. If I'm still here I'll be out in the open. I'd be better off in the forest."

Mokou sighed. "Mystia, even if you are a youkai the villagers consider you one of their own. You don't need to run and hide in the forest."

Mystia's wings twitched. "I don't care what the villagers think, I'm not one of their own. I'm a youkai! I eat humans." She finished tying things up and turned back to the immortal. "I kinda like some of you humans, and I'm glad you helped me when my wing was broken. But I'm not going to become everyone's pet."

Mokou frowned then closed her eyes and shrugged. "Fine whatever. Do things your own way. If you change your mind the village will be here."

Mystia opened her mouth to reply, then turned around and moved to grab the eel cart. She still had her pride.

She wouldn't admit that she liked the village enough, that being sent away with it would bind her to the village forever.

And while Mystia had changed a lot, she was unwilling to be bound to anything. It was a pretty cage. A large cage. But a bird had to be free, to fly and sing as she wanted to. Even if that meant danger.

The interminable meeting finally done, Jiyuwan headed home.

He found Akiyoshi in the dojo, meditating. The young man's eyes opened and he bowed to his father. "I'm sorry for causing you to lose face over my selfish actions."

He bowed in return. A bow for equals. "No. I apologize for my position forcing you to chose between filial piety and the path of righteousness." He walked forward and placed a hand on the young man's shoulder. "I am proud of you my son."

Akiyoshi was still young enough to blush with pride at that. Or perhaps Jiyuwan was wrong and blushing was the correct response, superior to the stoicism he'd developed.

"Thank you father," Akiyoshi replied. "I only hope it doesn't come back to hurt you later."

"It will not," Jiyuwan said. "You should worry about yourself more my son. You will probably have to find a new place to live soon, and while I am certain you will do well on your own, I would not wish this to be a surprise to you."

Akiyoshi nodded. "I understand father. I have a temporary house planned out. And… as for after the war, we shall see how the war progresses."

"Indeed." Jiyuwan turned and headed to the dining hall. "But for now we should eat and rest. The battle will not be for another three days."

Renko and Chen flew down and waved to Murasa. "Hey," the ghost sailor called out. "Your friends just dropped in a couple of minutes ago. They're in the garden talking to Shou."

"Thanks," Chen said as she shot off, Renko slowly following after. The cat Shikigami always moved in dashes when she was excited.

Ran was scratching behind Chen's ears, while Maribel, Nazrin and Shou were watching with varying levels of amusement.

An idea worked its way into Renko's mind and she flew down. "Hello Mary," she said before petting the blond girl's head.

Maribel squirmed, "Hey, I'm not a cat!"

"But you like it anyway right?" Renko asked with a grin.

"Seriously Renko you're embarrassing me…" Maribel blushed but didn't move away. Renko was glad to see an happy expression on her face again.

Renko's teasing was sadly interrupted by a cough. "We probably should get through all the details so you lot can go off and find rooms," Nazrin said.

"Hey!" Maribel and Ran both glared at the mouse youkai, while Renko stifled a chuckle. Shou just dropped her hand on Nazrin's shoulder.

She then turned to Ran. "So is there anything specific you need our help with? I have some plans, but I'm willing to work together with the rest of Gensoukyo if you need us."

Maribel looked up at the fox youkai as well. "What is our plan anyway?"

"If we'd gotten more people willing to stay with us I'd have asked you to join us, but now…" Ran thought for a moment.

Renko sighed. "I hate trying to plan based on our enemies making mistakes."

Ran nodded. "Yes it is annoying. Shou, when the invasion comes could you try to link up with us?"

Shou nodded. "Simply call for Bishamonten's aid and I shall come. I haven't learned to appear in multiple places yet, so I'll have to fly there though."

"We're trying to force the Lunarians to spread out right?" Chen said. "So that should actually help us more."

"And the ones that run into you aren't likely to realize they're fighting a youkai god," Nazrin said cheerily.

Shou smiled at that, then bowed to the group. "Alright. Well if you change your mind, or if you need sanctuary, come here. Our doors are open to all who desire peace between youkai and humans after all."

As Shou and Nazrin walked away Maribel looked over at Ran. "You know, if they just decide to kill us they'll have a much easier time of things. Help won't arrive in time. Is that really your plan?"

Ran closed her eyes. "That is my plan. Even if all our friends and allies stood with us, against the combined might of the Lunarians we'd be destroyed. If we had the tengu it would be different but…" She sighed then opened her eyes. "We're doomed if they do this right. In fact if they do this wrong we still might die. We're their primary target. If they overestimate on anyone it's likely to be us."

Maribel's eyes narrowed and Renko took her hand. "I see."

Ran smiled wryly. "Sorry this isn't like how wars are supposed to go. I'm afraid that the old maxim, 'Victory goes to the side that, at a crucial moment doesn't make a mistake,' is far closer to the truth. This is going to be a series of blunders and missed opportunities. We can only hope they miss a big opportunity and we don't."

"Which is why, even though I know you're going to complain about this Chen, I need you to try to organize the other youkai during the battle," Ran said.

Chen looked shocked, her tails bristling in agitation. "But Miss Ran! I'm a stong shikigami, even if I'm not borrowing your power! You know I can fight by your side," she cried.

Ran leaned down and hugged her Shikigami. "And I'll need your strength finding people who can support us in battle. You can find me instantly. Someone like Medicine can't, and once they realize the scope of the invasion you might be able to finally get them to help us."

Chen's face fell. "I get it, but…"

"I understand Chen," Ran said giving the Shikigami another squeeze.

Maribel turned to Renko but she held up her hand. "Not a chance Mary. You aren't leaving me behind. Besides, I'm a better fighter then you are."

Maribel looked down at the ground. "But… I don't want to lose you too."

"What about my feelings you dummy?" Renko ruffled Maribel's hair again to take the sting out of the words. "I'm not going to abandon you." Renko gave Ran a look, and the fox youkai nodded and stepped away.

Renko leaned forward. "Hey Maribel. Do you remember when you first dreamed of Gensoukyo?"

Maribel looked confused but nodded. "Yes."

"When you brought those treasures back, when I realized you'd found Gensoukyo, I thought there were only two choices for me. To throw them away and keep you with me in my world, or to let you realize that you were actually a part of this world and to lose you forever." Renko felt embarrassed admitting it, but she pressed on, "I worried about it all night. I didn't want to let you go. I wanted to go

myself. Would I let you go to this world that you seemed to love, or would I hold you back to stay by my side?"

Maribel's mouth opened in surprise. "You never told me Renko…"

"Yeah, I didn't really like myself back then. I honestly didn't know what I would choose," Renko looked up. "But do you remember what I did say, when I met you the next day?"

Maribel smiled slowly. "You said, 'Let's wake up! Change the world of dream to that of reality!'" Her smile faded though. "But I don't have a dream anymore Renko. Or maybe I have a dream, but it's not what I want to base my life around."

Renko pulled Maribel's chin up. "Then let's search for my dream Maribel. A dream where the village is peaceful, where the children still smile, and where we can meet with all of our friends."

"I believe we can find that dream Maribel. Maybe the scenery will be different then we expected, and maybe some old friends won't be there, and some new ones will. But I believe we can find that dream together. Just like we did before."

"Renko!" Renko fell backwards as Maribel threw her arms around her. She could see Mary was crying again, and maybe she was crying herself. But these weren't tears of sorrow.

They lay on the ground for a while. Finally Maribel said, "Let's go find your dream, Renko."

Renko smiled. "Well, we've got all the Sealing Club members, so I guess we should start."

Mary smiled in return. "I suppose if you're with me, I won't have to be worried about you being late this time."

Renko chuckled. They stood up and walked hand in hand to where Ran and Chen were standing. Ran tried to pretend she hadn't seen

the whole thing, and Renko tried to pretend she didn't notice Chen staring at them.

"So where should we go next?" Maribel asked.

"I think Mayohiga would be the best place to wait." Ran said. "We should have two days before the assault, but we've been surprised before. Consider tonight the last safe night. After that? War could begin at any time."

-Epilogue-

I can see all the players now. So many souls, each unique, each searching for their own place. It both dissociates me from their realities, and binds me closer to them then anyone has a right to be.

I see Lord Tenshou sitting in his throne room. Still convinced he's doing the right thing for his people, as he continues to seek vengeance against a woman he killed three hundred years before.

I see the man who murdered my wife sitting in meditation. He dreams of death, knowing it to be the result of his path, yet he still follows his duty to the end.

I see another soul down below, shining brighter then all the ones left here in our once pristine capitol. She dreams of death as well, but it is neither a goal nor a fear. Simply another obstacle to overcome.

I see two lovers, each wondering if this will be their last night on earth, holding each other tightly. Their thoughts are perfect mirrors, each putting the other before themselves.

I try to pull back, to see the broader picture, but that is a meaningless sea of emotions. I know that we Lunarians are the villains of this story, but I see the same thing when I look at both sides from afar. There is love and hate, sorrow and eagerness, fear and courage, and a desire for justice, or at least vengeance.

I wonder what someone would think, if they knew they were going to be the villain of a story? Perhaps they would want to be seen as sympathetic? A tragic figure. Or perhaps they would wish the mistakes and flaws that led them to the role buried. Let history show them to be a monster, so that their goals will not be tarnished by their reputation.

I no longer believe in our quest for purity. I no longer wish to hide from death. For it is in death that I began to understand the value of life. Win or lose, when the war is over, I will leave this city. Forever.

But out of respect to those who try to follow that dream. Who fled the Earth so long ago, and who fled the moon when it too was tainted by blood. Out of respect for my brother, and my beautiful wife, who fought for the dream of a perfect world, I shall make our society the villains of this story. With no excuses, no understanding.

I make an exception for Jiyuwan. This is my revenge you see. I will show his flaws and his virtues, so that he can be judged for who he truly is. That is all the punishment my heart can stand.

I shall now sleep. For when I wake again, the war will begin.

And an extra long chapter for the finale.

I got a few questions from previous readers which I'll try to answer here. Firstly was about Rinnousuke. I personally figure half youkai have about 4-6 hundred year lifespans (depending of course on what youkai they're half) and with Kourin already commenting on how his lack of aging was scaring the villagers I figured he wasn't going to be around after a 500 year time gap.

I also had people asking about the Moriya. They'll be appearing again later with a longer explanation for their actions, but the short form is, gods have to follow rules. Rules that the Lunarians know very well. Shou would be prevented from interfering as well, were it

not for the fact that one of Bishamonten's duties is to guard and avenge Buddhist temples.

I'm already into book three, though school is slowing me down some. I hope to have it ready for reading soon, but this is the section I've worked very hard to get to, so I'm going to take my time and get it right. Please wait warmly. I'm giving it my all now.